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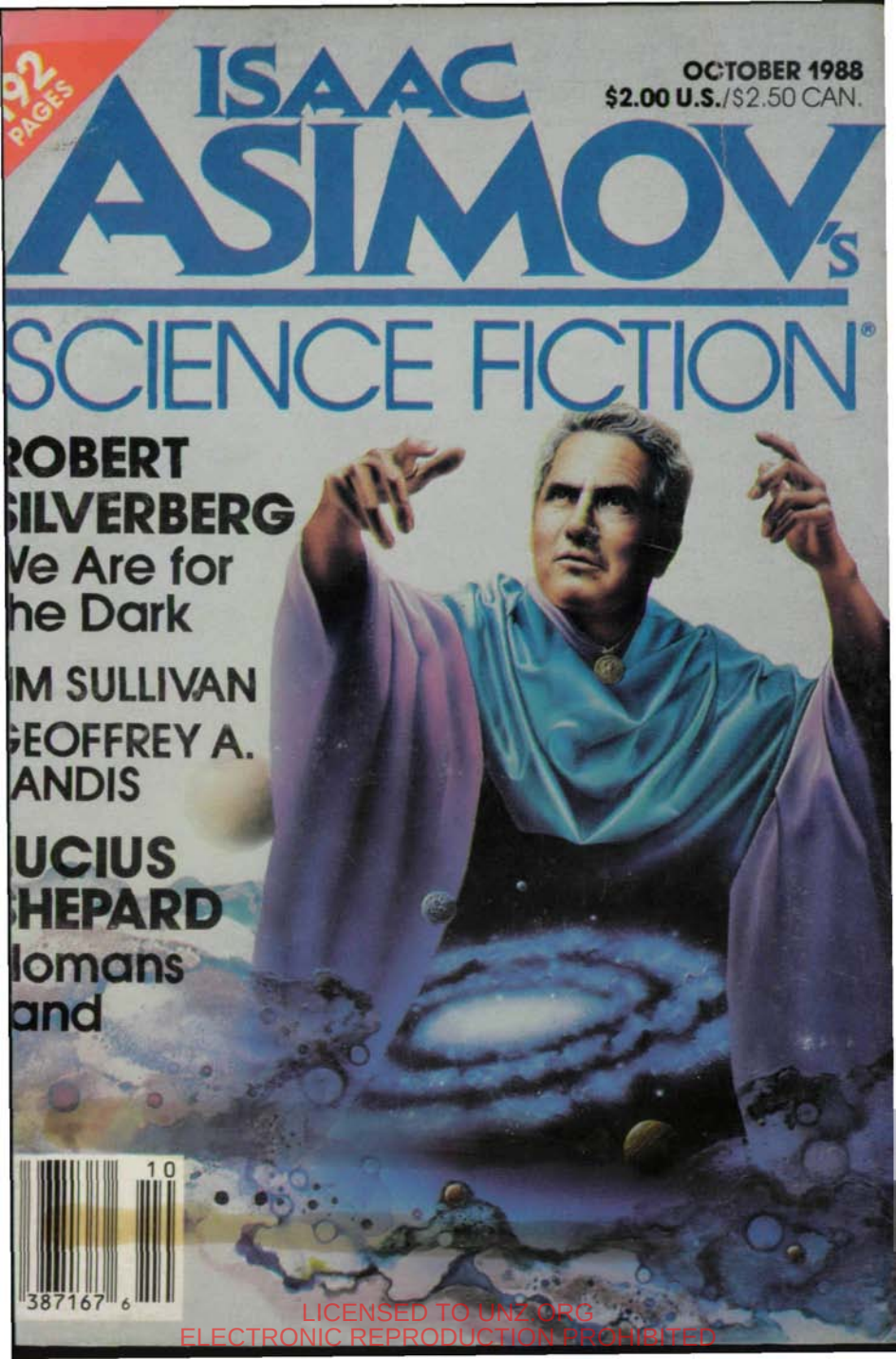

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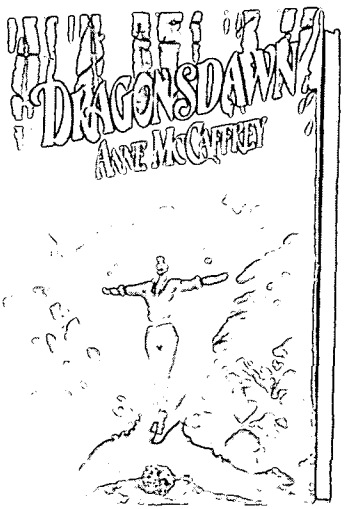

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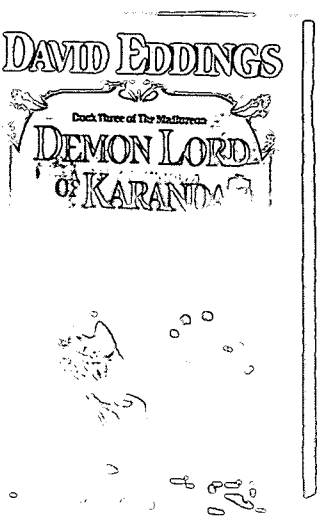

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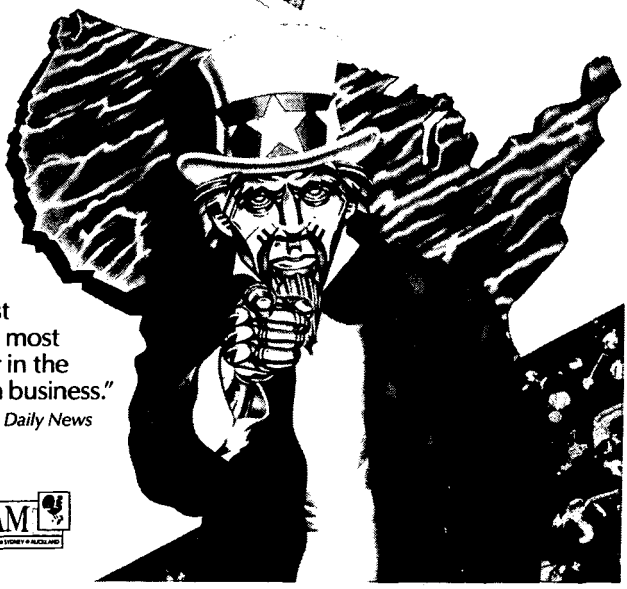

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

OWNERSHIP?

A couple of weeks ago, I received a fan magazine. Such things do arrive once in a while. From past experience, I know that if a fan magazine arrives out of the blue, it is very likely that there is an article in it, or possibly a book review, that will deal with me or my writing, and that its editor wants to make sure I see it.

Furthermore, human nature being what it is, I am reasonably confident, when such an item arises, that the reference to me will be uncomplimentary, and it certainly was in this case. Apparently, the youngster who edits the fan magazine reasoned that I would admire the cleverness with which I was pilloried and might even write a letter of gratitude that could then be published in the next issue.

Sometimes I am tempted to write such a letter (being only human myself), but I can do something better than that. If issues of general interest are raised by such an article, then I have an editorial soapbox from which I can expound my own views on the subject.

The issue of general interest raised by the callow youth who wrote the article was this: Since he feels that he *owns* science fiction writers and that they write for him and him alone (plus a few others like him whom he is willing to allow into the charmed circle), then science fiction writers (his property) have no right to prostitute themselves by writing other kinds of material for those outside the field.

I won't deny that at first reading I thought the writer must be joking, but a second and more careful go-through revealed no signs of a merry twinkle in his eye. He was clearly in a state of fury.

What bothered him immediately was that he had spotted in some newspaper a regular feature entitled "Isaac Asimov Presents" followed by five questions of general interest that the reader might amuse himself by answering. The reader can then compare his answers with those given in the paper.

Let me explain how that came about. A gentleman named Ken Fisher had prepared a series of quiz questions (and their answers) in a dozen different fields, graded into three levels of difficulty, and submitted it for publication to a pub-

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lisher who happens to be a good friend of mine. (All publishers, editors, etc., with whom I deal become good friends of mine. I am incapable of maintaining a purely business relationship.)

The publisher, S. Arthur Dembner, was uncertain as to whether the book ought to be published. He therefore sent me the manuscript and asked me to look it over and tell him whether it should be published. I looked it over and said, "Publish!"

He then asked me to look over all the questions and spot anything wrong (if I could) and divide the book into two balanced parts and write an introduction for each. I did this and it took considerable effort and time, and when I was done he asked me to allow the title to read *Isaac Asimov Presents Superquiz, by Ken Fisher*. I pointed out that Fisher might object, but Dembner assured me that Fisher was enthusiastic since it might help sales, and that would obviously benefit him. So, since I had indeed done considerable work on the book, I agreed.

The book was published in 1982 and it was followed by *Superquiz II* and *Superquiz III*. What's more, a game company manufactured a board game based on the books, and Dembner agreed to the syndication of a newspaper column that would consist of questions taken from the books. In all the reincarnations, the items read "Isaac Asimov Presents."

This all seems perfectly reason-

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able and aboveboard to me, so what were the fan writer's objections? In the first place, I gathered he thought the questions were too easy and he scorned them. Of course, that's not surprising. There he was in college, and in a very prestigious college, too, but, despite that, he might be an insecure individual who suffers agonies at the thought that people might underestimate his intelligence. If he is faced with a series of questions he judges too easy for his own giant mind, he might decide that I (after all, it is Isaac Asimov who is presenting it) am coming to the contemptuous conclusion that this is all the difficulty he can handle. This would cause him to feel insulted and he would naturally turn on me with a snarl.

I'm sure that if he stopped to think of it, though, even if he were only as intelligent as the average college student, he would know that the quiz was intended for as many people as we could manage to inveigle into buying the book. That means we would naturally have some easy questions as well as some hard ones. If we put out a book with questions only highly erudite people could answer, we would sell very few copies. Besides that, he would also eventually come to the conclusion that I don't know him from Millard Fillmore and wouldn't dream of being personally contemptuous of him.

The second thing he objected to was my letting my name be used when I, in all likelihood, had nothing to do with the matter, so that I was simply prostituting myself.

There are two answers to this. In the first place, he confuses assumptions with facts. He *thinks* I had nothing to do with it and flails away at once. But, as I've explained, the assumption is false. I had plenty to do with it and I put in considerable work.

Secondly, I'm afraid I have to admit that my name *is* worth something. That is not because it's a cute name. It's because I have worked hard for nearly fifty years *making* it worth something. When Joel Davis asked me to allow my name to be put on the magazine, it was with the thought that it would help the magazine. And when I agreed, it was with the thought that it would be useful to have another science fiction magazine (not for me, you understand, since my position is secure) but for the young writers it would publish and encourage—the Barry Longyears and Connie Willises to come.

Similarly, I am perfectly willing to allow my name to be used in other projects which I feel are worthwhile—anthology series that I work hard on as editor or co-editor—series of novels by young authors who deserve the added fillip (in my opinion) to their careers—specialty books which, in my opinion, deserve a push. For instance, a book has just come out entitled *From Harding to Hiroshima* which is an informal history of the United States from the end of World War I to the end of World

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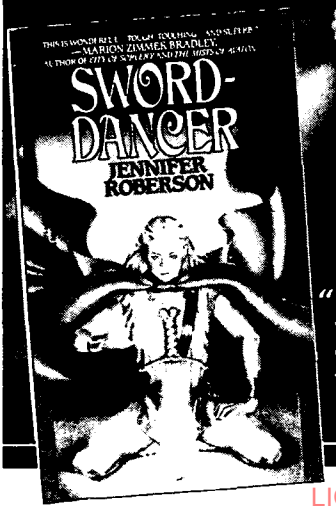

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DAW FANTASY

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War II. I worked on the manuscript and on the galleys and loved it, so the book came out (with the permission of the author) under an "Isaac Asimov Presents."

This is *not* prostitution. I don't make much money on it; I *do* do significant work; and, in every case, I consider the cause worthwhile.

But having said all that, we come to the most important question —that of ownership. Does a writer belong to his readers? Does he belong to a special group of readers? Because I have written a great deal of science fiction, do I owe it to my readers—who have always been incredibly loyal and supportive—to write nothing else? When I spend two years spending time on a two-volume book on Shakespeare, have I illegitimately deprived my readers of two science fiction novels?

The answer is "No" in every case. I am a *writer*. I am best known for my science fiction and some eighty percent of my income comes from science fiction and I have no hesitation in identifying myself as a science fiction writer if the point comes up. However, I am a *writer* and I write what I *choose* to write. Over two hundred of my books are *not* science fiction and the first of these was published in 1952 (it was a biochemistry textbook). If the fan-writer is accusing me *now* of being unfaithful to science fiction on the basis of the column, he is thirty-five years behind the time. I was unfaithful long before he was born.

This is true of any writer. No decent, self-respecting writer belongs to his readers. Any decent, self-respecting writer would be eager to abandon his readers, at least temporarily, in order to try something new. At the risk of sounding mawkish, a writer belongs to his craft.

As for the fan-writer, he must know this, too, if he stops to engage in the perhaps unaccustomed task of thinking a bit. Or if he doesn't, I'm sure he will know it after a while when he gets older and gains more experience.

One last point. Some of you may wonder why I am spending so much time defending myself. It may strike you—or you—that all my points are self-evident and that I shouldn't allow myself to be pushed into an unnecessary response by a callow youth who is trying to be clever.

But, alas, I'm vulnerable. I *am* prolific and I *do* write quickly, and I *do* write on all sorts of subjects and I *do* engage in all kinds of projects, and it's true that the "Isaac Asimov Presents" bit is becoming more and more common, so I can't help but feel that some of you do indeed take a dim view of all this, and suspect me of letting my "name" make money for me.

Well, it's not so, and I don't want it to be thought so. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Doctor and Editor(s),

Should I or shouldn't I? I had the feeling that I just had to express my thanks for the *I, Robot* film play but thought that you might be simply swamped with expressions of gratitude and did not really need another.

On second thought, though, I recalled that generally those that don't like something are much more likely to let you know it than those that do.

All of this is just to say that the Asimov/Ellison "collaboration" (even if it wasn't exactly that) was absolutely perfect as far as this reader is concerned. I am a visual person, as the good doctor makes frequent claims not to be, and this format was just great for someone who wants to *see* what they read about.

Even the camera angles were there and gave me the point of view of view just right for the action ensuing in the story. I *loved* it!

Many thanks to Isaac, I was reminded of stories that I so enjoyed reading years ago, and to Harlan for the views, upbeat pace, descriptions (I had Joanne Woodward in my head throughout), and the fine pictures he brought to the whole thing.

It wouldn't do for all stories to read like this but I'm certainly grateful that you decided to do this one. Again, thanks.

Linda Kropff
San Jose, CA

Publishing the screenplay was a risky experiment for us, but it seems to have worked out.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

Ordinarily, it's a bad idea for an author to respond to a review. However, Baird Searles, in his comments on *Gallicenae,* raises a question that seems worth pursuing in its own right. He states that "the pagan and Christian 'magic' clash—somehow it seems wrong that both sides should have accepted miracles (i.e., two magical systems coming from different sources is a problem in coherent fantasy)."

Certainly fantasy can be composed on a basis of strict Aristotelean logic, the law of the excluded middle and so forth. Indeed, this was at the heart of many of the wonderful old *Unknown Worlds* stories, the working out of a clearly defined set of assumptions. The result was often very funny but it could be serious or outright tragic.

Even in such cases, though, a writer can assume that more than

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one class of beings has supernatural powers. This is taken for granted in most of the folklore and legendry on which modern fantasy draws so heavily. Thus Grimm, the Arabian Nights, etc., are full of demons, magicians, ghosts, and other agents of darkness. They can work miracles the same as holy men or divine beings. Think of all the times the Devil grants wishes. I remember one tale which says that, while God created most of the animals, Satan made some—the Manichean heresy, of course, but tempting when we consider certain species! The medieval *Heimskringla* of Snorri Sturluson, basically a sober history of Norway, at one point makes Odin appear anonymously and try to subvert the missionary King Olaf Tryggvason. Examples could be added at great length.

Beyond this lies the area of mysteries. Every theology, perhaps especially the Christian, is full of paradoxes and unanswerable questions—original sin, the problems of evil and pain, the reconciliation of free will with divine omniscience, to name just a few. Logic can only go so far; thereafter the theologian admits that we're out of the human depth and must simply accept seeming contradictions. Life itself is ultimately mysterious. And, while I scorn certain popular misinterpretations of quantum theory, it does seem that physics may be approaching some limit of comprehensibility.

All this can be symbolized and embodied in fantasy. C.S. Lewis did it very well from a Christian standpoint; *Till We Have Faces* is quite germane to these remarks of mine, but other books of his have a similar concern. Without the religious motif, writers such as de la Mare, Machen, and Dunsany have given us their own examples of how effective the "translogical" story can be. If nothing else, when successfully done it evokes the dark, irrational, but powerful side of ourselves.

In short, I deplore any attempt to tell literature what it may and may not do. Doubtless this was far from Baird Searles' intention, but a little clarification can't hurt.

Poul Anderson
Orinda, CA

I'm on Poul's side in this.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a seventy-one-year old science fiction fan. I got my start with Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Tarzan and Mars books, then back in the Depression, I read "The Insect Invasion" in *Blue Book Magazine,* and *The Valley of the Dolls,* and later graduated to Dr. E. E. Smith and the Galactic Patrol and Lensman series, etc.

I'm far behind in my reading, having just finished the August, 1987 issue. I enjoyed "The Blind Geometer," by Kim Stanley Robinson, but was aghast at the author's ignorance of electric circuits. In the story, the blind man jams one point of his scissors into an electric outlet in the wall, supposedly blowing the fuse and putting out the lights. This doesn't work because: 1. The wall outlets and the lights are on different circuits, and: 2. Unless he inserted both points of the scissors

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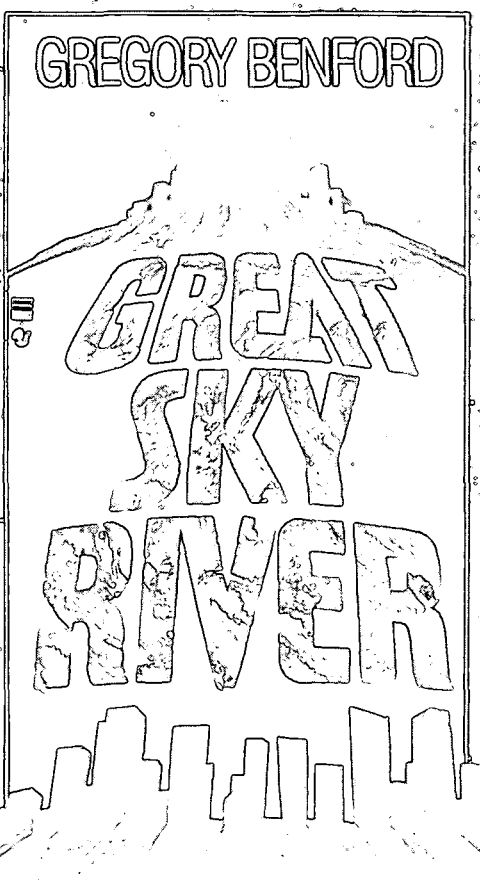

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into the outlet, completing the circuit from one terminal to the other, he wouldn't blow even that one fuse. Then he continues: "*Crack*. The current held me cramped down for a moment—intense pain pulsed through me. . . ." Any electrician can tell you that it is perfectly safe to grasp one side of a circuit (ordinary house current—nominally 110 volts) provided that you are not grounded, and do not touch the other side of the circuit. The fact that his shoes were wet had no bearing on the subject, as he was on the seventh floor, on a carpeted floor, and therefore well-insulated from the ground. Then, if he did actually jab the scissors into both sockets of the outlet, the circuit would be completed through the scissors, and not through his body. The most he would experience would be a burn from the scissors being heated before the fuse burned out. The hinge of the scissors would provide enough resistance that it would probably get pretty hot.

You don't expect to find such glaring errors in a science fiction story, where the author supposedly has some knowledge of scientific subjects (and electricity is definitely scientific).

Sincerely,

Ben Johnson
213 Coventry Drive
Campbell, CA 95008

Shocking!

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am writing in response to a letter printed in the Sept. '87 issue of your magazine. The letter said it addressed a mistake in "Neptune's Reach." I would like to correct a misconception made by the person who wrote that letter.

The letter addressed what it thought was a violation of Kepler's Third Law. It stated that a tremendous amount of energy would be needed to keep the bathyscaphe directly under the synchronous satellite. This isn't entirely true. Since the bathyscaphe is connected to the satellite, both the bathyscaphe and the satellite must move with the same angular velocity. When the satellite lowers the bathyscaphe, the center of mass of the system remains in the original orbit while the satellite moves into a slightly higher orbit. Also if oblateness of the Earth and solar perturbations are ignored the gravity gradient due to the Earth will attempt to align the two masses radially.

This means that as long as the two masses under consideration are connected by a line (tether) that is kept taut the two objects will tend to align with each other. This past summer I participated in tether research. My research indicated that significant fuel savings could be achieved by using a tether. NASA is presently looking into using a small tethered satellite to investigate the Earth's upper atmosphere. NASA hopes to perform this experiment on a future shuttle mission.

I would like to thank everyone involved with this magazine for a job well done. I have enjoyed *IAsfm* for many years. My mom bought my first subscription when I was fourteen and I have been reading

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it ever since. The only complaint I have is that I miss the math teasers by Martin Gardner.

Val Schlossberg
Graduate Student
Dept. of Aeronautics & Astronautics
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN

Think of that! Our magazine is now old enough to have attracted the attention of teenagers who are now old enough to be graduate students. It seems to me it was just yesterday—

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I hope that *IAsfm* is not going to institute a practice of printing serials. Since I dislike reading part of a story only to have to stop and then read another segment a month later, I usually save them till I have them all and then read it all at once. However, if a copy should go astray, it creates a problem as the segment it contained is missing. I don't have to tell you how that can ruin an otherwise good story!

In the Sept. 1987 edition, you alluded to Einstein's theorem that the speed of light cannot be exceeded. You said that "Faster Than Light" stories contain an essential impossibility.

Taking a retrospective view of history and science we have no iron-clad guarantees that Einstein was right! We do have a preponderance of evidence that tends to support his assumption; however new discoveries could prove him wrong. Many of the "proven" theories you and I learned in college in the fifties have since been disproven. History tells us that they ridiculed the railroad train, the steam boat (Fulton's Folly), the self-propelled carriage, and the idea that man could build a machine in which he could fly!

I believe that your circulation department has discovered a way to *exceed* the speed of light. I received the Sept. 1987 issue in November, but I normally would have received it in July or August. The only reason I can arrive at for its tardiness is that it was routed by way of Orion or Callisto! Late or not, it was appreciably received and enjoyed!

I have been a reader of *IAsfm* since its inception when a picture of you was printed on the cover. At that time, you and I looked so much alike that I was frequently asked how my picture happened to appear on the cover! However, time has changed that. While I have retained my youthful good looks, you have grown old and ugly till you resemble the middle of the three BEM's sometimes used as a filler at the end of some of the stories.

Thanks for many hours of enjoyable reading!

Sincerely,

Frank Webster
Detroit, MI

The speed of light is not in the same class as a steamship. You laugh at the steamship if you doubt the engineering. You laugh at the speed of light limit if you don't understand physical theory. These are not comparable.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your editorial in the January issue of the world's best science fiction magazine addressed a matter of concern to me. I am a pharmacist and for several years have served on the Code Blue team in the hospital where I worked. I agree with the thesis of your editorial and in particular with the idea that support should be withdrawn in cases where the quality of life is poor should the recovery process be successful.

Codes blue are, for the elderly, more often than not exercises in futility. I attended twenty-two codes, all for patients in their sixties or older, before there was a successful one, and that was on a man in his late forties. The cardiac arrest recovery procedure is not gentle.

The extracorporeal heart massage is very likely to result in one to several broken ribs. If the recovery process is not promptly begun and/or if the ventilation and circulation are not adequately maintained there will be irreversible brain damage. Too often after a code when the attending physician was asked by a fellow physician as to how the code came out I've heard the reply, "Well, we created a vegetable." The statement was not made in jest.

One particular case comes to mind, a woman of ninety-six years on whom a bowel resection had been done. Her family had ordered that everything be done for her. In a period of less than six weeks the poor woman coded three times. Because she was being electronically monitored the recovery process was started promptly, meaning in well under a minute (there is an expected successful outcome if the process starts within four minutes, but the sooner the more likelihood of a favorable result). Each time the heart was restarted. Each time the woman suffered from the aftermath of the code—sore throat from the rapidly inserted airway, broken ribs, bruises from extravasated blood from the many IV needles used, to name the usual ones. All she knew was that she hurt from the operation and hurt worse in other places after the code was over. She didn't understand why she was being treated so. She didn't even understand that her family ordered that it be so.

Before anyone should be allowed to order that all possible effort be made to recover their loved ones they should have to attend at least three codes. I am certain that no one would be willing to order similar treatment for someone they really loved. I didn't when my father was hospitalized. All of the intensive care nurses I know make statements to the effect that no one is going to code them. No one is going to code me, either.

Now to a question I've wanted to ask for a long time. In a past editorial—long past by now, so memory may have failed me—you mentioned that an influential person in your life was a Dr. Mary Caldwell. If that is the correct name, could she have been at the University of Arizona in the sixties and early seventies? I knew such a person who almost convinced me to switch from research in pharmacology to microbiology. It would be a small world, indeed, if it were the same person.

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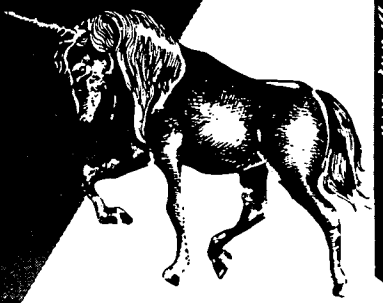

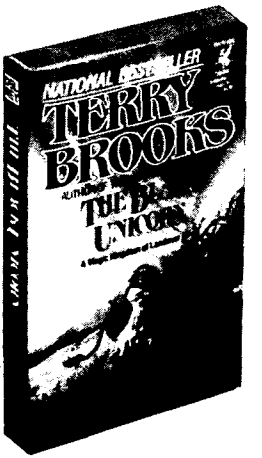

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Thank you for the opportunity to vent a little steam.

Sincerely yours,

Wallace E. Longmire
Shreveport, LA

Thank you for your support. I expect I will be getting many letters of disagreement. As for Mary Caldwell, as far as I know she stayed at her post in Columbia until she retired, but what happened to her afterward, I don't know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Since I enjoyed your short story "Galatea" (Mid-December *IAsfm*) very much, I thought I would share with you a piece of information I only recently learned myself. It turns out that Pygmalion's statue did not have the name Galatea (although it *is* a classical name) in the original classical myth. In fact, the statue had no name at all. (Talk about fantasizing over a love *object*!) The name Galatea was first given to the statue in eighteenth-century French poetry. It became firmly attached to the statue because of the popularity of the nineteenth-century play *Pygmalion and Galatea* by W.S. Gilbert. After that, everyone was convinced the statue had always been named Galatea, and so that information was included in handbooks on mythology. By the way, I didn't just believe the article where I read all this; I looked up the myth of Pygmalion in my trusty Loeb edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. What do you know!—the statue *doesn't* have a name in Ovid. Just goes to show what useless trivia scholarship can turn up, doesn't it?

All the best,

Rozalyn Levin
Chicago, IL

My goodness, you're right. I just checked the matter. To think that I never knew this, and I a fanatical follower of W. S. Gilbert. —And I found out too late to put it into my encyclopedic Asimov's Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan, *which has just been published.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Today's news includes: bloodbath during elections in Haiti; a man, despondent over financial reverses, shoots his wife and himself leaving one baby to die of dehydration and another to live on potato chips and toilet water before she is found; a man kills his two sons by putting them in a foundry ladle; six different accounts of men shooting or stabbing wives or girlfriends; a preview of a TV drama based on the man who killed a large number of hospital patients by injection, and on, and on, and on. And you want us to have the legal power to decide the proper time for the terminally ill to die! You have a much higher opinion of humanity than I have.

I do agree that "heroic means" to prolong life are often cruel. I wonder how often that really happens. I have known many family members and friends who were cared for either at home, in the hospital, or nursing home until their death. None of them was connected to machines or even fed in-

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travenously in order to prolong a life that had become burdensome. I agree that laws are needed to allow a patient or his family to decide to what extreme doctors should go to keep a body functioning. I also believe that a person who is dying in great pain should be allowed any drugs that can ease that pain even if those drugs might hasten death. Certainly the possibility of addiction shouldn't even be a consideration in this case. However, we haven't been able to prevent violent crime and punishment after the fact doesn't accomplish a whole lot. What makes you so certain that we could "make sure that the right was not abused"?

I really enjoy your editorials whether or not I agree with them. They are usually stimulating and well-thought-out. The letter section is usually as thought-provoking and/or fun as the stories. There aren't many places to find quality short stories, SF or otherwise, but your magazine never disappoints me. I have only two complaints. One, admittedly very minor, is that the date on the magazine is often two months ahead. That irritates me, but I'll live with it. The other is that you don't print poetry in every issue. You have printed some powerful and imaginative poems—let's have more.

Kaye Coller
Lorain, OH

If you have so low an opinion of humanity then what good does it do to keep some people alive against their will? Does this in any way make humanity better?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

One of science fiction's attributes is that it gives the writer much freedom to examine trends in today's society. Connie Willis's "Ado" is a great example of that. She subtly and deftly gets her point across while being funny at the same time. I literally laughed out loud, enjoying both the humor and the skill of her writing.

This short story should be required reading for anyone who can be affected by censorship (i.e., anyone at all). Though "Ado" is a piece of fiction, it is disturbing to realize that many students are missing out on their cultural and scientific heritage because schools and textbook publishers are prevented, or intimidated, by vociferous but misguided special-interest groups.

As for Willis, please have more of her stories soon. I greatly enjoyed "Spice Pogrom" and "Blued Moon." And "Chance" still haunts me though it's been some time since I read it.

Sincerely,

Julia M. Malik
Richboro, PA

Personally, I object to the phrase "special-interest groups." It is often used to signify people who support viewpoints you don't like, but whom you prefer not to name. I prefer to identify the people I speak about. For instance, I consider the group that is most active in attempting to censor books (and everything else) are the religious fundamentalists. They're the ones the schoolboards and librarians are scared of.

—Isaac Asimov

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Coste

I've had this neat idea for a time travel novel for some, er, time now.

Except that I'm troubled by one thought. . . .

Hasn't everything that can be said about time travel been said? You know what I mean . . . all the crazy paradoxes, the impossibilities, the alternate realities, alternate histories, the whole goofy rigmarole started by lusty old H.G. Wells.

Well, yes . . . I guess so. Nevertheless, if I ever get a break between writing my horror novels and my non-fiction, I still plan on going ahead, and blithely attempting to add my mark to the crazy canon of Time Travel.

And the reason should be obvious.

We find time travel, its opportunities, its nostalgia, its bittersweet potential for salvation and doom, love and death, just absolutely irresistible. And, better than that, it's downright funny.

I would hazard a guess that time travel is a plot ploy that will be around for quite a while.

But it hasn't been used extensively in games. I vaguely remember a quirky Yaquinto role-playing game on the topic and, I may be wrong, an SPI boardgame on the subject. Pacesetter produced an exciting role-playing game, *Timemaster*, and a series of what-if, full-blooded adventures. So it was a pleasure to see *Talisman Timescape* (Games Workshop, 1220 Key Highway, Baltimore, Maryland, 21230) arrive.

Talisman is, of course, the hit fantasy boardgame, a number-one seller that has also been critically acclaimed. The game consists of three "tracks," or levels, that lead to the center of the board where players can battle for the Crown of Command and win the game. Along the way encounter cards are flipped over revealing gold, powerful allies, and the usual gallery of fantastic creatures eager to rip you to pieces.

Novel in the game is the fact that un-resolved encounters (i.e., a giant gorilla that defeats the hapless player) stay on the board. The board never gets stale, or static, and there are a number of ways to get to the inner track.

Wise people that they are, the folks at Games Workshop-UK have kept up a steady stream of "expansions," adding new encounter cards, a dungeon to be explored, and new

(Continued on page 115)

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THE
TEAM SPECTRA
REPORT

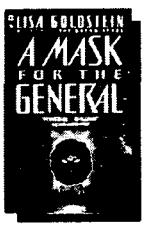
We'd like to use this space this month to offer a sort of Public Service Announcement: a warning about Lisa Goldstein's work, specifically her latest novel, A Mask for the General. You see, it's very easy to be deceived into thinking that by picking up this novel, you will be providing yourself with a night or two of pleasant intellectual diversion. After all, the cover art is very mystical and beautiful and the basic story line is on an extremely human scale. You probably wouldn't know from picking up this book and holding it in your hands that it could shake you to your very core.

That's why we're here to warn you.

A Mask for the General is about rebellion and revolution. It's about awakening from an all-too-long sleep and *doing* something. It's about a sadly changed America of tomorrow, but there are an awful lot of resonances of today in it. As you read Lisa's marvelously subtle writing, you will find yourself slowly becoming more and more agitated, more and more compelled to talk about the things that she's talking about. You will find yourself moved in strange ways and not quite know why.

A Mask for the General might be one of the most powerful novels you will read this year. It is certainly what science fiction at its best should be. But it is *not* a bit of quick light reading. We just thought we should let you know.

SPECTRA BANTAM



TEAM SPECTRA

LISA GOLDSTEIN
A MASK
FOR THE
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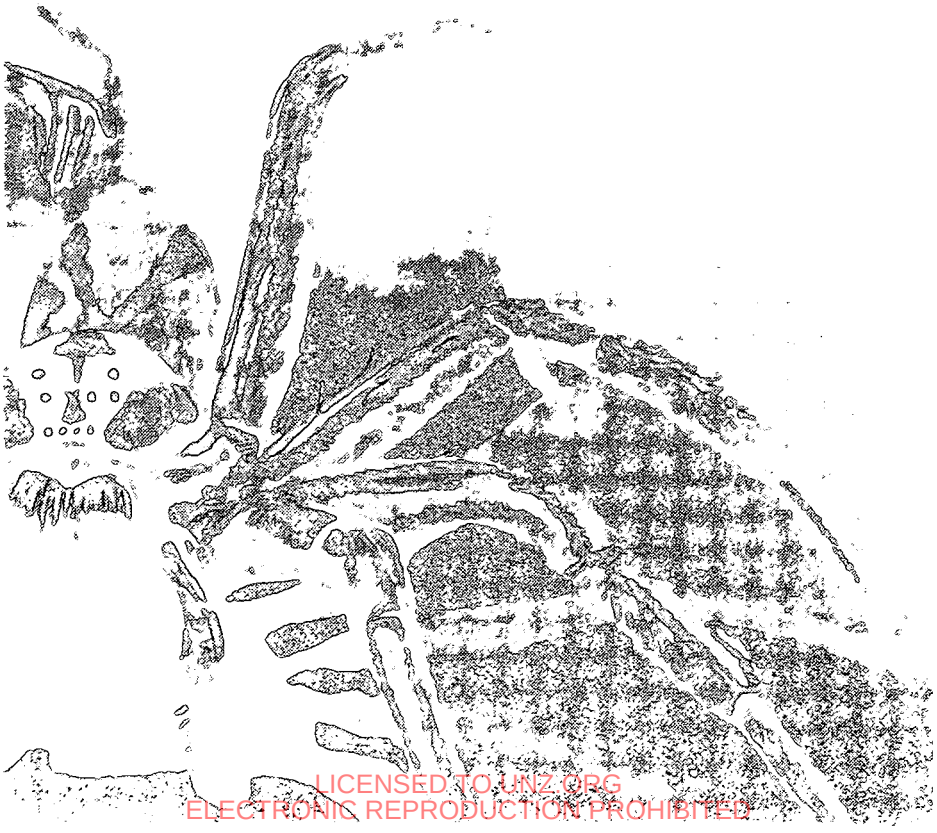
NOMANS LAND

by Lucius Shepard

Lucius Shepard returns to our pages with an eerie account of a mysterious island off the Massachusetts coast.

art: Laura Lakey



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1

Four miles due south of the Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard lies Nomans Land, an island measuring one mile wide and a mile and a half in length, rising from sand dunes tufted with rank grasses and beach rose on its eastern shore to a cliff of clay and various other sedimentary materials some thirty feet high that faces west toward the Massachusetts coast. Prior to 1940, the island was the site of several small farms, but during World War II, when German submarines began to be sighted along the coastline, the government confiscated the land, removed the inhabitants and erected large concrete bunkers on the beaches from which military observers scanned the sea by day and night for enemy periscopes and conning towers. Following the war, the island was ruled off-limits to civilians and utilized as a target area for bombers and fighters stationed at Otis Air Force Base, a practice that continues, albeit sporadically, to this very day; on winter nights when the din of the tourist season has passed, it is possible to hear the rocket bursts as far away as the island of Nantucket some twenty-five miles to the east. Yet in spite of this, thousands upon thousands of gulls and terns and a lesser number of old squaw ducks—often seen flying in peppery strings against the sunsets—have chosen the island for their nesting place, and as a result it has been designated a National Wildlife Preserve. It may seem peculiar that a wildlife preserve should be subjected to bombing runs and rocket fire; however, the point has been made—and to many conservationists it is a point well taken—that these intermittent attacks do less harm to the avian populace than would the influx of human beings (no matter how high-minded their intentions) that would occur should the island's restricted military status be voided. And so Nomans Land remains isolate, its silence broken only by wind and surf, the mewing of gulls, the occasional barking of seals at sport on the beaches, and the inconsequential noises of the moles and other rodents that tunnel through its soil. All except the newest bomb craters have been filled in with grass and sand, but walking is a difficult chore because much of the land is dimpled rather like the surface of an enormous golf ball, and it is easy to make a misstep. Scrub pine covers most of the island, hiding all but the tallest ribs of the splintered farm buildings, and the sight of these ruins in conjunction with the lonely cries of the birds, the evidences of war and warlike activity, gives the place an air of desolation wholly in concert with its name. And as to that name . . . could there be some profound significance to the running together of the words "no" and "man," to the lack of an apostrophe implying possession? Or is this merely due to the carelessness of a clerk or a mapmaker? And even if it is such, does the inadvertency of the nomenclature reflect an unconscious knowl-

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edge of uncommon process or event? There are no evil rumors associated with the island, no legends, no sailors' lies about strange lights or wild musics issuing from that forlorn shore. But a lack of legend and rumor in these legended waters, where every minor shoal is the subject of a dozen supernatural tales, seems in itself reason for suspicion, for wonderment; and perhaps a more compelling reason yet for suspicion lies in the fact that despite the island's curious past, despite the penchant among New Englanders for collecting and transcribing local histories, not one has come forward to ask the many questions that might well be asked concerning Nomans Land, and no human voice exists to give the answers tongue.

2

On the night of October 16, 198-, during the worst storm of the season, the fishing trawler *Preciosilla*, with its engines dead and wheelhouse afire, was swept through the Muskeget Channel between Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, then westward in heavy seas toward Nomans Land. Four of the ten-man crew had been lost in the explosion that had ripped apart the engines, and three more had been washed overboard. As the vessel drew near Nomans Land, the survivors caught sight of the island silhouetted in a lightning stroke against churning clouds, and, knowing that the *Preciosilla* could not long stay afloat, they committed their souls to God and their bodies to the sea in an attempt to reach solid ground. One of the three, Pedro Arenal, a Portuguese man of New Bedford, was carried by the tidal rip past the island and never seen again. However, the remaining two, Odiberto "Bert" Cisneros, age forty-six, also Portuguese, and the ship's cook, Jack Tyrell, an Irishman just entering his thirtieth year, reached shore within fifty feet of one another and took shelter in the lee of a concrete bunker, where they sat shivering, too cold and shaken to think, stunned by the thunderous concussions, gazing out at the toiling darkness, at detonations of lightning that illuminated waves peaking higher than circus tents and plumed with phosphorescent sprays.

It was Tyrell, a thin, black-haired man with a sly cast to his sharp features, who had the urge to move inside the bunker, feeling the cold more intensely than Cisneros, who was the better insulated of the pair, being muscular and bandy-legged, with the beginnings of a pot belly, a seamed, swarthy face, and—at the moment—a terrified grimace punctuated by two gold canines. He gave no sign of hearing Tyrell's shouts, and at last Tyrell came to his feet, staggering with the wind, his hair flying, and took hold of Cisneros under his arms. Cisneros let himself be

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hauled erect, but when he realized that Tyrell was trying to wrestle him inside the bunker, he tore loose from the Irishman's grasp and went stumbling farther down the slope of the dune. To his eyes the bunker, with its pale cement bulk and black slit mouth, had the look of an immense jawbone from which the demented howling of the wind was issuing, and he wanted no part of it. A powerful gust buffeted him, driving him backward, his eyes rolling up toward the sky in time to spot a flash of amber radiance and the sweep of the beam from the Gay Head light crossing the bottoms of the racing clouds. Though he had sailed those waters for twenty years, in his panic he had no recollection of the lighthouse, and the blade of light seemed a portent from hell. He dropped to his knees in the mucky sand and crossed himself, deeper into fear than ever before, shreds of prayers running through his head like tattered distress flags.

Tyrell was tempted to leave him. He had no great love for the Portuguese, none whatsoever for Cisneros, who had twice menaced him with a knife aboard the *Preciosilla*. But their ordeal had welded something of a bond between them, and besides, Cisneros' fear acted to shore Tyrell up. "Damn your ass!" he shouted, fighting through the wind to Cisneros' side. "You stupid piece of shit! Do you want to freeze . . . is that it?" Once again he grappled with Cisneros, hauled him up and began dragging him toward the bunker.

His brush with prayer had left Cisneros resigned to fate. What did it matter how he died, whether blown into the sea or crushed in the jaws of the bunker? At the last moment, as Tyrell pushed him in over the cement lip and into the black maw, his fatalistic resolve eroded and he tried to break free; but strength had drained from his limbs and he toppled in onto the floor. Tyrell crawled in after him, and they huddled together close to the wall. Lightning flashes strobed the interior of the bunker, revealing pocked walls streaked with whitish bird droppings, matted with cobwebs, and more cobwebs spanned the angles of the corners, billowing and tearing loose in the wind. Cisneros shut his eyes, preferring blindness to flickering glimpses of what seemed to him redolent of dungeons and torture chambers. He began to mutter the Stations of the Cross, repeating those consoling words until they had insulated him against the fierce battering of the storm, and before long, shrinking like a child from a confrontation with his fears, he sank into a deep sleep.

Tyrell, too, was afraid, but his fear derived not from the storm or the island, but from the past few hours aboard the *Preciosilla*. He stared into the darkness, seeing there the faces of the dead, the burning wheelhouse pitching like a great mad window inset into the darkness, with the blackened, shriveling figure of the captain erect amid the flames, still

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clutching the wheel, and the mate, his eyes slits of reflected fire, throwing up his arms like a benighted Christian to welcome the huge talon of ebony water that had plucked him up and borne him down to Hell. . . . Tyrell shook his head, trying to clear it of those nightmarish images. Peeled away his slicker and rubbed at a cramp in his thigh. A shudder passed through his chest and limbs, seeming to liberate all the dammed-up weakness inside him, and he leaned back, resting his head against the wall, feeling distant from the storm, from all that had gone before.

What a bloody mess! he thought.

Still and all, he'd been in worse spots. He was a survivor, and he had survivor's luck. Take the time he, Joe McIlrane, and Pepper Swayze had been trapped by the Brits at Pepper's house, with only one rifle and a hail of bullets shattering vases and pictures on the wall. And then prison. God, hadn't that been a stroke of fortune, to be stuck in the same cell as the best damn break-out artist in the IRA? And the same luck had been working for him in fleeing Ireland, making it to the States and the sweet life, with a nice girl and a clean bed and plenty of time for mucking around and having a few beers in the evening. Of course sooner or later he'd be bound to take up the struggle again. He couldn't be letting others have all the glory of driving the goddamn Brits back to their gloomy little bloat of a kingdom. . . . A violent burst of lightning split open the black moil of the storm, burning afterimages of the bunker walls on Tyrell's eyes, and he let out a squawk.

"Jesus!" he said to the sky. "Are you wanting to kill me?"

Thunder grumbled, the sea boomed.

"Well, fuck you, then."

He tried to force his thoughts back to Ireland, but found that his memories—that was how he related to the lies he'd told so often, as fond, brave memories, inhabiting them with more frequency than he did his actual past—he found that they had ceased to be a comfort. He wondered how much longer the storm would last. Probably no less than a day. Afterward he'd build a fire on the north shore, big enough so they'd notice the smoke at Gay Head. It was for certain *he'd* have to do whatever was necessary, because Cisneros wasn't going to be any help. The bastard had been all nails and sharp edges with a deck beneath him, but just tip him over, give him a shake, and he wasn't worth spit. Well, old Bert was a fortunate soul this night, for he had as companion the Scourge of Belfast, one Jack Tyrell, who never yet had been known to let a brother-in-arms fall untended by the way.

"Easy there, old son," he said, patting Cisneros' shoulder. "I'm ever with you, don't you know."

Bert Cisneros moaned, the world cracked and dazzled, and Jack Tyrell, who once had laughed in the face of the firing squad of dreams, laughed

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now, believing there was no terror in the entire universe that could withstand the arsenal of his imagination.

3

Cisneros did not so much sleep as fall down the staircase of his forty-six years, tumbling slowly head over heels, bumping and rolling across the landings, taking long enough at each to register its consequential evils. The man he'd knifed when they'd put into Nantucket during a nor'easter; the friends he'd cheated; the women he'd beaten. He saw his wife, her face purpled and lumped with bruises, tear-stained, clutching the little gold cross that hung from her neck, and for the first time he felt shame. It was a foul dark slant of a life, an inch of time fractioned by violent stupidities, energized by an ego convinced—despite all the evidence against—of its mental superiority, and looking at it in this wan light, he had a sense of relief on passing the final landing and plummeting back to where he had begun, lying curled like a dark pearl in the mouth of a giant oyster, not asleep, but somnolent. He could see the whole island, see it from alternating perspectives and through a lens of perception that transformed each sight into a strange jeweled design upon a black ground: birds with ruby eyes tucked in among the dune grass, which showed as waving silvery cilia, and ghostly pale clouds eddying above, and the shattered timbers of an old ruin edged with an unholy shimmering of green fire amid the winded pines, and jade blue waves marbled with an iridescent circuitry of foam that broke over a cliff to the west, and the wind a whirling gray-green fog. He wondered how he could be lying in the bunker and yet appear to be hovering above different quarters of the island, and then he noticed the thousands of golden wires extending from his body, each connected to some point on the island. It was through these wires, he realized, that his senses were being channeled, allowing him to overlook the place, to inspect every detail. He heard a voice . . . no, two voices. One was muffled, agitated, calling him back to the darkness of life, and he resisted it, listening instead to the second voice, which was soft—more a musical sonority than actual speech—and transmitted a feeling of tranquility and power similar to that he'd experienced as a child when kneeling in church: a feeling he associated with God. He didn't believe that the god speaking to him was the god of his childhood, but he was gratified that his prayers had reached someone's ears, and since to his mind one god was much like another, he had no moral problem with the transference of faith. And when his thoughts began to change, becoming oddly angular and literate, full of grim resolve, when he began to think of himself not as Bert Cisneros

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but as Quentin Borchard, to see himself as a tall pale man with hawkish features and deep-set eyes shaded by tufted eyebrows, dressed in his Sunday suit of black broadcloth, he did not question this, knowing that God's ways were not his to understand, and surrendered to those thoughts . . .

. . . and found himself walking in a high blue day with mackerel clouds far out to sea, planting each step firmly, squarely, as if intending to leave a clear track. When he reached the edge of the western cliff he took a stand in the knee-deep grass, leaned forward and peered down at the cliff face. With its fissured gray surface, it had the look of an ancient decaying forehead rising from the sea, grooved by harrowing thoughts. The cauldron of waves at its base seemed to pull at him, to lodge a knot of their chill tonnage in his stomach, and he straightened, fixed his eyes on the sunstruck sea, on cobalt swells flowing away to the horizon. He thought it peculiar that he had no pain. It had been the pain gnawing at his intestines that had brought him to this point, and now, as if his decision had proved a cure, he felt calm, translucent, free of affliction. If it had been only that, only pain, he would have seen it to the end; but he could no longer stomach the sight of his illness etching new lines on Martha's face, disfiguring her as hideously as the sea had disfigured the cliff. This was the best way, the moral way. She would never believe him a suicide; she would assume that he had been walking by the cliff, suffered a spasm and lost his footing. She'd have the money from the land, and she was still pretty enough to find a new husband, a new father for the children. Blessedly they were too young to feel the true sting of grief. Oh, they would weep and think of him in Heaven. But time would heal those wounds, and all that he could do for them now was to hasten their healing by dying swiftly. And that would not be as difficult as he'd thought. He was dead already, killed by the force of his commitment. Standing there, he felt walled off from the past, from life, and he thought he could feel the entire island at his back. The cove on the eastern shore where urchins clung to the rocks of a tide pool; the beachvine fettering the north slope, its complex shadows trembling in the breeze; a vole peeking from its tunnel, its black eyes starred like Indian sapphires; the white spiders—unique to the island—that annoyed him with their incessant biting, but wove webs of unsurpassed intricacy among the pines; the terns wheeling and wheeling above the deep. He felt them all summed up in a unity of tension, as if they were a power that stood beside him, joining him in what must be done. He was not a religious man. His pragmatic nature had not allowed him to accept the existence of a hereafter, and he could not accept that possibility now. However, he believed that if there was a god it would be—like the island—an isolate thing capable of absorbing the lesser quantities that came within its sphere,

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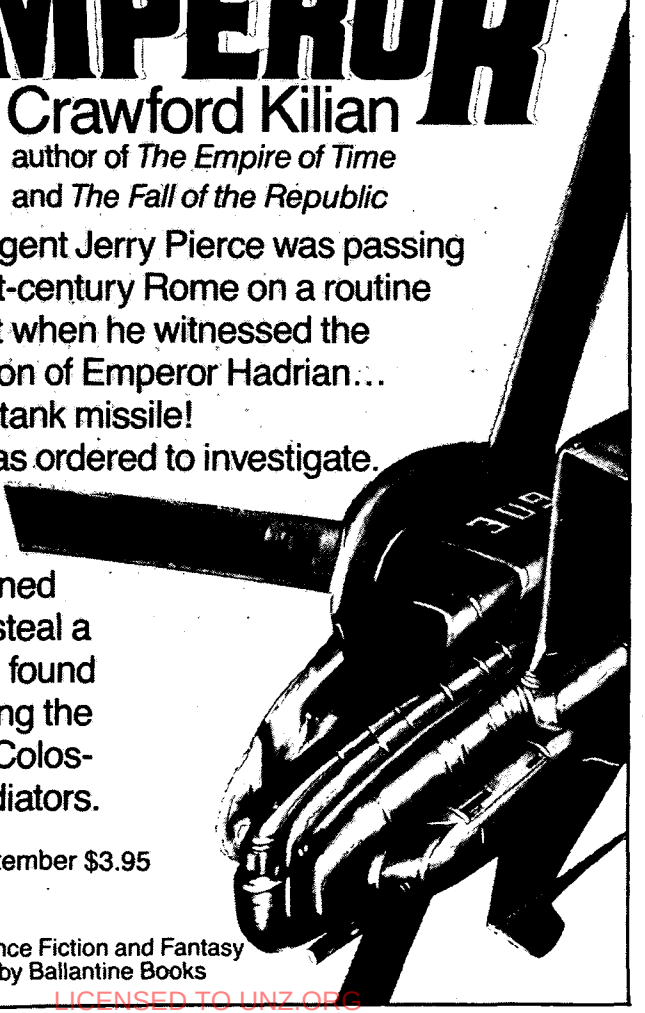

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assimilating winds that had touched the tops of Balinese temples and tides that swept past the shores of Tenerife. In a sense the island *had* been his god, the object of his devotion, his labors and hopes, and he felt closer to it now than ever before. He loved the old place, and perhaps that, not some mystical abstraction, was the definition of a god: something labored over and nourished, a thing that through long process of devotion became indistinguishable from its devotee. It seemed his thoughts were being orchestrated by the crashing of the waves and the screams of the gulls into a kind of music, a flight of logic and poetry, and he realized that he had stepped forward, that he was falling. He had an instant of fear, but the shock of impact, the stinging cold of the water, numbed his fear, and he went pinwheeling down in blue-green light, icy light, icy dark, slowly, slowly, into a dream of a storm, into a secret place where others shared the dream, and no man lived, and truth was form, and form was chaos, and chaos was ordered anew.

4

Morning, and the storm held over Nomans Land. Slate-gray waves piled onto the beach, eroding the beach; the clouds blackened and lowered, and the wind flattened the dune grass, keening across the island, driving slants of rain into the mouth of the bunker, stinging Tyrell awake. All his muscles ached, and there was grit in his mouth. He groaned, rubbed a cramp from his thigh, scratched an inflamed spot on his wrist and noticed Cisneros still curled up asleep, his neck and head turtled beneath his slicker, several cobwebs spanning between his legs and the wall. Tyrell hawked, spat, and said, "Hey, Bert! Rise and shine, you filthy spic!"

Cisneros didn't move.

Tryell reached out, gave his shoulder a nudge, and Cisneros mumbled, but remained asleep.

"Worthless bastard," said Tyrell. "I'm better off without you, anyway. Plucking at your damned rosary and complaining to the saints like an old woman! To hell with you!"

He sucked at the scummy coating on his teeth, glancing around at the bunker. Cobwebs everywhere fettering the pale yellow stone, with dozens of white spiders creeping along the skeins, some suspended like tiny stars on single threads. He felt itchy movement on his calf, let out a squawk and crushed a spider that had climbed up under his jeans. He staggered to his feet, his flesh crawling, and began stamping on spiders that tried to scuttle away into the dark corners. When he was certain that the floor was clear, he stood shivering, hugging himself against the

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cold and keeping an eye cocked for any spider that might lower from the ceiling.

"Cisneros," he said shakily. "Wake up."

The sleeping man appeared to shudder.

"You want these dancey little fuckers traipsing all over you?" he said, cheered by the sound of his voice. "Fine then, Bert. That's just fine with me, old son. For myself, I've fucking had it. My stomach's empty as a country church on Tuesday midnight, and I'm going to find me an oyster or a dead bird or some damn thing to fill it." He climbed half-out of the bunker mouth, sat perched on the lip turning up the collar of his slicker. "Can I bring back something for you, Bert? No? Well, maybe you'll feel differently after your nap. I'll be checking in on you. Sleep tight, now."

He swung his legs over the lip, sank to his ankles in the sand, then slogged up the face of the dune, stumbling, crawling on all fours to the crest. He got to his feet again, struck full by the wind and the slashing rain, and stared out across a broken ground: tufts of pale green grass sprouting from bowl-shaped depressions, some of them twenty feet wide, and beyond, where the land flattened out, stands of Japanese pine through which he could make out a fresh crater about a hundred feet off. Rising above the pines, near the center of the island, were spears of dark wood, obviously ruins. He started toward them, and something big and dirty white in color flew up from the grass, screeching, its wings flurrying at him, black beak punching the air in front of his face; he shrieked, threw up his arms, swung his fists, fell and went rolling down the dune.

He came to his knees at the bottom of the dune and looked around for the tern. It was nowhere in sight. He must, he realized, have come too near its nest, and he wondered if there were any eggs. Last resort, he thought. Last fucking resort. For one thing, raw eggs were low on his list, and for another, he wasn't eager to tangle with the tern again. He stood, brushed clots of wet sand from his jeans, and set off for the ruins, picking his way among the overgrown craters. The air in the pines was shaded to a greenish gloom, with raindrops beaded like translucent pearls on the tips of the needles; the ground was less broken, but cobwebs were everywhere—the webs of white spiders like those that had infested the bunker. He tore them away, clearing a path, and after a few minutes' walk emerged from the sparse cover into a large clearing centered by the ruins. From the spacing of the standing timbers, the shingles lying amidst the other wreckage, he decided that they must have been part of a barn. And that mass of shattered boards to the right, smashed flat as if by a gigantic fist, that had likely been the main house. He walked over to the ruins, prodded the wreckage with his toe. Glistening dark planks with white brocades of mold, weeds poking up between their

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overlaps; shredded pieces of tin. He'd been hoping he might find an old store of canned food, but it was apparent there was nothing left that would do him any good.

The clouds frayed overhead, rips of ashen sky showing through for an instant, the rain diminishing; but then they closed in again, lowering, thick slabs of blackish gray like fleshy dead leaves matted together, and the wind gusted in a mournful rush, bending the pines all to one side, then letting them snap back to upright, like a line of tattered green dancers. Tyrell turned, unsure of what course to follow, wondering if he could knock off one of the birds with a stone, and could have sworn he saw someone standing at the edge of the clearing. Someone slender, wearing a hooded black slicker. His heart stuttered, he took a backward step. Then he understood that what he must have seen had been no more than a roughly human shape formed by an artful combination of shadows and the actions of the wind and the textures of discolored needles in a niche between two of the pines. However, a moment later he heard movement, and this time he caught a glimpse of a figure slipping behind a pine trunk.

"Is that you, Bert!" he called anxiously, and when there was no response, he called again. "Who's there?"

The rain picked up, spattering off the splintered planks at his feet, blurring his view of the pines, seeming to measure the passage of seconds with the oscillating hiss of drops seething in the pine boughs.

"Hey!" Tyrell shouted. "Hey, who the hell are you?"

Again there was no response, and, unnerved, imagining the presence of some madman or worse, he was about to head back to the bunker, when the figure moved out into the clearing and came toward him with a faltering step. A woman. Strands of whitish blond hair plastered to her forehead. In her late twenties, or maybe a bit younger. She had Nordic features, glacial blue eyes, a strong chin and mouth—a face that while not beautiful had a kind of imposing sensuality. She stopped a foot away, regarding him with a look that was both hopeful and cautious, and made an incompleted gesture with her hand that made him think she had wanted to touch him. "You're from the boat," she said.

"How do you know that?" asked Tyrell, taken aback.

"I saw it burning last night." She brushed stray hairs beneath the hood of the slicker; a raindrop slid down her cheek to her chin. "I tried to get down to the beach last night, but the storm was too fierce. I lost my way. This morning I went to the bunker. I knew if anyone had survived they'd take shelter there." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Your friend's still asleep."

"Is he now? Well, he had a hard night." Tyrell blinked at a drop that had trickled into the corner of his right eye. "My name's Jack Tyrell."

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"Astrid." She pronounced the name tentatively as if hesitant about identifying herself.

"And what are you doing here?"

"I was . . . studying. The spiders . . . the white ones. You must have seen them. I'm an entomologist."

"Bugs, is it?"

"Yes, I . . . I was supposed to be picked up, but the storm . . . the boat couldn't get out. My friends . . . they'll be here once it lets up."

Tyrell could understand her timidity—a woman alone in this godforsaken place; but he sensed that her hesitancy was the product of something more than a simple fear of assault, that she was in the grip of some profound uncertainty.

"Maybe," he suggested, "we should go back to the bunker. Get out of the rain."

"No," she said, glancing behind her, to the side, then fixing Tyrell with a wide-eyed stare. "No, I've got a place. It's . . . closer. And there's food if you're hungry."

"God, yes! I'd be eternally grateful for anything you can spare." He flashed her his most winning smile, but it didn't brighten her; she kept darting glances in all directions as if to reassure herself that everything was as usual. He noticed the swell of her breasts beneath the slicker, the flare of her hips, and felt a pang of desire that—with a dose of Catholic guilt, chiding himself for such lustful thoughts—he put from mind. Besides, he told himself, her friends would be coming. Now, if *she* wanted to get friendly . . . well, that was another story.

"There's no reason to be frightened," he said. "I won't harm you. Now Bert . . . that's my mate. He's a different matter. Beats his wife, he does. And carries a knife." He laughed. "And in spite of that, in spite of being ignorant as sin, the sod thinks he's a bloody genius. Yeah, you best watch yourself with him about. He's a menace even to himself. But I'll keep him in line, never you worry."

Her expression flowed between confusion and astonishment, and then those emotions resolved into a mournful laugh. "Oh, I'm not worried," she said. "I know there's nothing to fear."

5

Cisneros slept on, slipping from dream to dream, dreams that would have amazed him with their bizarre materials under any other circumstance, but which he had come to recognize as part of an intricate and consequential process that was most natural in its incidence, the underpinnings of creation itself. All life, he understood, was a dream. This

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was something his mother had told him when he was a child, and he had accepted it as a child's truth, the idea that one's days were but a fleeting image upon the mirrored pool of God's imagination; he doubted that his mother had seen it as other than a pleasant fairy tale. Now he realized that it was the ultimate truth. Life and dreams were, indeed, one and the same, and he had been fortunate enough by virtue of fatigue and terror to dive deeply enough beneath the surface of sleep so as to reach the source of dreams, the place from which life derived its impulse and meaning.

Millions upon millions of lives, of dreams, flowed to him along the golden skeins that held him fast, but with a connoisseur's selectivity he chose to inhabit only those who had been involved in some way with the island: Indians, farmers, soldiers, civilian observers, and those who, like him, had come there by chance. He dreamed he was a boy playing atop the cliff, dropping stones into the boil of water at its base, lying on his back, the grasses tickling his nose, and watching clouds so big and white and fat, they looked like famous souls. Then a young woman came with a man from Gay Head to take him as her first lover, and he lingered in that dream, deriving prurient delight from her tremulousness, her pain and pleasure. Then a mad submarine commander who had been stranded by his crew and thought his craft was gilded with baroque ornamentation like something out of Jules Verne, that it was armed with crystalline torpedoes containing drugs and music, and believed he had sailed in secret waters wherein he and the crew visited lost continents and sported with sea-green women and were borne to ecstasies of sensibility by the verses of rhapsodes with beards of kelp and black pearls beneath their tongues.

These dreams were more complicated than the others in aspect and particularly in their use in playing the game of the world. Compared to the rest, they were like rooks and bishops in relation to pawns . . . for an instant he didn't understand where he had gotten that image. He had never played chess, had no familiarity with the pieces or the moves. But then he realized that, informed by the dreams, he was becoming a new man. All the evil compulsions of his former life were falling away like an old skin; his petty lusts and avarice, all the intemperate qualities of his nature were gradually being subsumed by a contemplative, sensitive character whose parameters were dictated by the contagious sweetness of more civilized souls, and he began to see that there was purpose to this change, that not by accident had he been led to Nomans Land. He was to provide a new turn in the affairs of God, to implement a new conceit. This knowledge dispelled the remnants of his fear, and he gave himself over utterly to the usages of the dreams, eager now to learn not only what deeds he must perform, but at whose agency he was to perform

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them. He felt he was dwindling, growing insubstantial, becoming merely another dream, and rather than allowing this to unman him, he experienced an intoxicating joy in the act of surrender, in the sense of unity that pervaded him, in the understanding that despite all his human frailty and faults, his sense of destiny and special purpose was soon to be fulfilled, that his sins had been forgiven and he had been chosen to know the lineaments of his God.

6

Set back from the ruins of the old farm, half-hidden in the grayish green shade of the pines, was a small shack with a tin roof . . . probably a tool shed that somehow had survived the years of rockets and foul weather. Its weathered boards were black with dampness, and the roof was half rust. Astrid had done a good job in making a home of the place. A large hotplate—battery-operated; with two burners—and a hurricane lamp were set on a rickety table, and beside them was a litter of scientific equipment: microscope, test tubes, and so forth. The floor had been covered with a carpet of dry grasses, and a supply of canned food was stacked along one wall; the gaps in the boards had been sealed with mud, and a sleeping bag was spread in the corner, with a couple of blankets folded atop it. After a few minutes, with the lamp giving off an unsteady orange glow and the hotplate heating the little space, warming cans of stew, the shack had taken on a cheery air; the sounds of the wind and rain seemed distant and unimportant. Only the cobwebs spanning the rafters struck a contrary note, and when Tyrell, thinking they might be too high for Astrid to reach, asked if she wanted him to beat them down, she said in a dispirited voice that there wasn't any point.

"They'll just come back by morning." She handed him a scorched can of stew, cautioning him to grip it with a rag because it was hot. "They're all over . . . millions of them."

"Yeah, some of 'em were busy making a nest out of ol' Bert." He sat down with his back to the wall, cradling the stew. Watched her sit opposite him. She had taken off the slicker, and proved to be wearing jeans and a heavy white wool sweater. A bit on the skinny side, he thought; but not bad. She caught him staring at her, and he tapped his spoon on the can. "This is good."

She said nothing, continuing to stare, tension in her face.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

She gave a start as if her mind had been elsewhere, shrugged, and said, "No."

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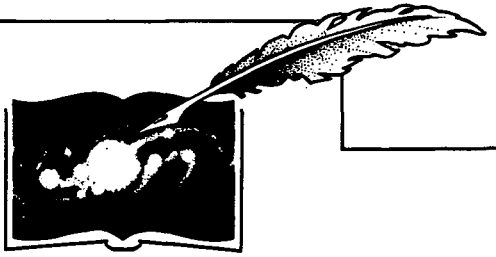

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"Must be something," he said. "You look like a little noise would put you through the roof."

She laughed nervously. "It must be the storm."

"Sure," he said in an arch tone. "That must be it."

She ducked her eyes, stirred her stew.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, and had another bite.

"Not very." She glanced up sharply, appeared about to say something else, but kept silent.

He spooned in more stew, chewed. "Tell me about yourself. Where are you from?"

"Woods Hole," she said listlessly.

"Never been there. I'm from New Bedford myself. And before that I was living in Belfast."

He had expected her to make some response, but she just kept on picking at the stew.

"I had to get out of there," he said. "Trouble with the Brits, y'know."

Silence.

"I was with the IRA," he added weakly, his mood hovering between anger at her disinterest and concern that she might not believe him. He decided on hostility. "Am I boring you?"

"In a way," she said. "In other ways . . . no."

"Oh, is that right?" He set down the can. "Perhaps you should enlighten me as to how it is I'm boring you so I can avoid it in the future."

"It's not important," she said.

"Maybe not," he said. "But I've got a notion you're thinking badly of me."

"What if I am?"

"I'd prefer you didn't, that's all. Is it you're swallowing all the bloody Brit propaganda about the IRA? Because if that's it . . ."

"Stop," she said. "Just stop."

"Because if that's it," he went on, "I'm here to tell you it's nothing . . ."

"I don't want to hear it!" Her voice shrilled. "Everything's enough of a lie as it is without you adding to it!"

"Listen to me, now!"

"No," she said. "You listen! You were born in Belfast, but you never had anything to do with the IRA. Three years ago you emigrated to work at your cousin's restaurant in New Bedford, and you've done nothing more notable since than get a local girl pregnant."

For a moment he sat stunned, unable to voice a denial. "How," he said, "how could you know that. I've never seen you before."

Her chin was trembling. "I've a gift," she said, and gave a despairing laugh.

"You mean you're psychic . . . something like that?"

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She nodded.

He caught her wrist, angry, afraid, not wanting her to know his secrets; but she wrenched free and stared at the place where he had held her as if expecting to see a bruise. She looked up at him, and he thought he detected a new fervor in her eyes; he took it for disgust with his lies, and wanted—for a reason he couldn't quite fathom—to repair the damage.

"I'm sorry," he said, wanting to confess everything, to explain that self-deception had sustained him against the guilt he felt on fleeing Belfast. "You see, I was . . . My uncle was in the IRA. I never felt right that I didn't follow him. The family . . . he was all they ever talked about. My bloody uncle Donald. Famous and in jail. But I couldn't take after Donald. I was afraid . . . that was part of it. But mostly I just never understood how it was you lifted a gun and killed a man. I mean, God, I hated the Brits. But I never could understand how it was you killed. You know what I'm telling you?"

She said nothing, but he could feel the pressure of her cold blue eyes.

"Are you listening to me?" he said. "Goddamn it, I'm talking to you. Are you listening?"

"I am."

"I'm a coward," he said. "I'm not ashamed of it, really. I was worried what other people might think of me. Donald was so goddamn famous . . . I didn't want to suffer by comparison, and that's why I've lied. But I'm quite satisfied being a coward. There's nothing wrong with it. If there were more of us cowards, the world would be a better place." He held her eyes, trying to read her opinion. "Well?"

"We're all of us frail." She said this with such wistfulness, he had the idea that she was not likely to judge him, that nothing he had done for bad or good was of any consequence to her. And that made him uncomfortable. Without the armor of lies, the motivation and structures of guilt to direct his conversation, he couldn't think of anything to say. He picked at a shred of beef with his fork.

"Do you want some more?" she asked.

"Not just yet."

Rain hissed against the shack, a gust of wind shuddered the boards, and thunder grumbled in the distance. "I should see about Bert," he said glumly. "He'll be hungry, too."

Astrid put a hand on his arm. "Stay a while longer," she said. "Just a little while. I've been here alone for so long."

"How long have you been here?"

"Seems like years," she said distractedly.

Tyrell leaned back against the wall, the warmth in his belly making him feel expansive against his will. "I suppose Bert can wait for a bit."

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He gestured at the cobwebbed ceiling. "Why don't you tell me about our tiny friends here?"

Her face froze.

"You said you were studying them, didn't you?"

"That's right," she said, a catch in her voice.

"So . . . what's their story."

She said something he couldn't hear.

"What's that?"

"They're poisonous," she said.

"Poisonous?" He sat up straight, feeling the inflamed spots on his arms and legs. "Shit, I must have half-a-dozen bites! What should I do?"

"Don't worry," she said. "The poison acts quickly. There'll be some hallucinations, probably. But if you've been bitten and you're still alive, then you're immune." She laughed palely. "Like me."

He remembered Cisneros. "I've got to get Bert! They were all over him. I . . ." Something in her face stopped him, and a chill point materialized between his shoulderblades, expanded and fanned out across his back. "You were down at the bunker. You said he was sleeping."

"You'd been through so much," she said. "I didn't want to . . . I don't know. Maybe I should have told you. I was confused. I've been here so long with just the birds and spiders . . ." Her chin trembled, and her eyes glistened.

"What happened to him?"

"Your friend wasn't immune."

"What are you saying . . . he's dead?"

"Yes."

"Jesus." Tyrell glanced up to the ceiling, to the star-shaped white spiders crawling along their webs. He remembered talking to Cisneros that morning, nudging him, and the man already half a corpse. Filled with loathing, he jumped to his feet, grabbed a stick from the table top and began swatting at the webs.

"Don't . . . please!" Astrid caught him from behind, got a hand on the stick and wrestled for control of it. She looked terrified, wide-eyed, a nerve twitching in her cheek, and more than her struggles, it was the sight of her face that made him quit.

"What's the matter?" He pushed her away, swung the stick at the webs. "You like the little bastards, is that it?"

"No, it's not that. It's . . ."

He took her by the shoulders, gave her a shake. "Will you do me a favor? Tell me what it is with you? One second you act like I'm the last man in the world and you've a great inner need for my company, and the next it's like you've heard the beating of leathery wings and the

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howling of wolves." He shook her again. "There's something not right here. I want you to tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing."

"Damn it!" He slapped her. "Tell me!"

"Nothing! Nothing!"

He slapped her a second time.

"It's the truth!" She began half to laugh, half to cry, building to hysteria. "Absolutely nothing! I swear it!"

Ashamed of himself, he helped her to sit and put his arm around her, comforting her with muttered assurances. Maybe it *was* loneliness that had gotten to her . . . that and the morbid nature of her studies. She'd probably been stranded here a week or so, and knowing what he did now, he doubted he'd be able to take more than a week on Nomans Land without showing a few cracks. She sighed, collapsed against him, nestling beneath his arm, and he was astonished at how settled and solid that little show of trust made him feel. He couldn't recall having felt this way for a very long time—perhaps he never had—and he wondered if it was the fact that he'd been forced into honesty, into confession, that had cleared away the rubble and granted him such a unimpeded view of himself and the world. It seemed that in giving up his defenses, his lies, he had also given up guilt and fear; and now, sitting here with his arm around a strange woman in a strange place, as vulnerable as he had ever been to the assaults of chance, he felt capable of making real choices, ones determined by logic and the heart's desire, and not reactions to something dread, something he wished to forget. His fear, too, had fled, and he could see that fear for him had not been specific, not merely concern for his own life in the political moil of sad Belfast; he had been frightened of everything, of every choice and possibility. And he realized that not only had his fear been based upon falsity, but that everything he had loved as well—women, country, and all—had been emblems of that fear, objects upon which he could pin the flag of his lies and the affectation of morality. Staring at the grain of the weathered boards, as intricate and sharp as printed circuitry, he thought he could see the path ahead. How he would give up his illusory notions of heroism. Find a mild, strong life. Become an ordinary hero. Sacrificing for family, for friends. That was the best you could do. The world was too strong a spell for any single man or idea to break. No matter how passionate your outcry, how forceful your blood and intent, it went on and on in its wicked, convulsed web, spinning nightmares and tragedies. That was the lesson to be learned of Belfast, of all the wild boys and their warring heat. Surrender. Look within yourself for worlds to conquer and principles to overthrow.

He noticed that Astrid's breathing had grown deep and regular, and

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thinking she was asleep, he started to lower her to a prone position, intending to cover her with a blanket and then rub out the cramp that was developing in his arm. Her eyelids fluttered open, and she tightened her grip around his waist.

"Don't go," she whispered.

"You're asleep," he said.

"No, I'm not . . . I'm just resting."

"Well,"—he chuckled—"maybe you better do your resting in the sleeping bag."

"All right."

She got to her feet sluggishly, went to the sleeping bag and then, her eyes downcast, kicked off her shoes and skinned out of her jeans. That caught him by surprise. He watched her work the jeans past her hips, step out of them with the delicate awkward poise of a crane. Her legs were long and lovely, pale, pale white, and he could see the honey-colored thatch of her pubic hair through the opaque crotch of her panties. His mouth was dry. He looked away, looked back as, instead of getting inside the sleeping bag, she lay down atop it, covering herself with a blanket. Her hips bridged up beneath the blanket, her hands pushed at her thighs, and he knew she was removing her panties. She turned onto her side, facing him. In the shadowy corner her eyes were large and full of lights.

"Come be with me," she said.

The storm slammed a wall of wind against the shack, rain drummed on the roof, and although Tyrell felt in the grasp of a curious morality, put off by Astrid's invitation, because they were strangers and this should not be happening, the fury of the storm moved him to stand. He went over to the table, extinguished the hurricane lamp. The cherry red concentric circles of the hotplate's heating coils floated on the darkness like bizarre haloes. He stripped off his clothing and, shivering, squirmed in beneath the blanket, turning to her as he did. She had pushed her sweater up around her neck, and her breasts rolled and flattened against his chest, warming him. In the dim effusion of light from the hotplate her features were rapt, her eyes half-lidded. He wanted to ask her a question, to understand why this was happening, to make certain that it was nothing low, nothing small, but rather something clean and strong, something to suit the tenor of his cleansed sensibilities; but as she pressed close to him, he knew that it was good. He thought he could feel the whiteness of her limbs staining him, and when he sank into her, he felt the movement as a sweet gravity in his belly, the kind of sensation that comes when you take a tight curve in a fast car and settle back into the straightaway with the whole world pushing you deep into the plush tension of the machine.

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"It's been so long," she whispered, holding him immobile, her hands locked around his back. "So long."

He wasn't sure of exactly what she meant, but it seemed true for him as well, it seemed forever since he had felt this perfect immersion, and he hooked his fingers into the plump meat of her hips, grinding her against him, easing deeper, dredging up a soft cry from her throat, and, without understanding anything at all, said, "I know, I know."

Tyrell waked to find the storm unabated. Pine branches scraped the outside of the walls, and the wind was a constant mournful pour off the sea. Dim reddish light fanned up from the hotplate, seeming to diffuse into a granular dust near the ceiling, like powdered rust on black enamel. He was disoriented by the oscillating pitch of the wind, the incessant seething of the rain, and to ground himself in waking he turned to Astrid, letting his left arm fall across her waist. She didn't stir. He peered at her, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, and when he made out her face, his heart was stalled by what he saw. Empty sockets; dessicated strings of tendon cabled across the bare cheekbone; the teeth gapped and the jawbone visible between tatters of yellow skin; hanks of pale hair attached to a parchment scalp. The stink of the grave cloyed in his nostrils; he could feel her clamminess beneath his arm. He let out a shriek, rolled off the sleeping bag and onto the dry grasses covering the floorboards, and crouched there, panting, resisting the impulse to give in to fear, trying to persuade himself that he hadn't really seen it.

"Astrid?" he said.

Not a sound.

He fumbled for his jeans, struggled into them. Called her name louder. Nothing. His skin pebbled with gooseflesh. He pulled on his sweater, slipped his feet into wet shoes.

"Astrid!" he said. "Wake up!"

He wanted to kneel beside her, to take a closer look and make sure of what he'd seen, but couldn't work up the courage. He backed away. The corner of the table jabbed his thigh; the hurricane lamp swayed, nearly toppled. He caught it, fumbled on the table for a match. His hands were shaking so badly, he wasted three matches trying to light the lamp, and when the light grew steady, it took all his willpower to look toward the corner and the sleeping bag. He shrieked again and staggered against the door, unable to catch his breath, transfixed by the sight of that horrid deathshead poking from beneath the blanket, sightless eyes focused on a white spider dangling on a single thread just above the face. Then the strand snapped. The spider dropped into one of the empty eye sockets, and for the briefest of instants the eye appeared to twinkle.

Tyrell's control broke. Screaming, he clawed the door open and ran full

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tilt through the pines, wet branches whipping his face and chest. He burst out into the clearing, stopped beside the wreckage of the main house. Rain slanted hard into his face, soaked the wool of his sweater. He wiped his eyes, started toward the beach, the bunkers, then pulled up, remembering that Cisneros was dead, not knowing in which direction safety lay. The winded pines bent their dark green tips, lightning made a vivid white crack in the massy leaden clouds of the eastern sky, and from the beach came the cannonading of the surf. Suddenly terrified that Astrid had followed him, he wheeled about. Someone was coming toward him from the pines. But it wasn't Astrid. It was Cisneros. Dressed in jeans and a wool hat and a slicker glistening with rain. Smiling.

Tyrell's thoughts were in chaos. He retreated from Cisneros, but as he did he realized that everything Astrid—ghost or whatever she was—had told him must have been a lie. Cisneros wasn't dead. Obviously not. But he couldn't quite believe that, and he continued to retreat, calling out to Cisneros.

"Bert!" he shouted above the wind. "Where you been, Bert?"

"Hello, Jack! What's the problem, man?"

"Bert?" Tyrell was still uncertain who and what it was that confronted him. "I left you in the bunker. I was coming back, but I wanted to let you sleep."

"I had a real good sleep," said Cisneros, closing on him. "Nice dreams. What you been doing?"

"Trying to find some food."

"Find any?"

Tyrell's answer died stillborn. His stomach was full—no doubt about that. And if Astrid was a ghost, how could that be? He wiped his eyes clear of rain again, thoroughly befuddled. Cisneros had stopped a few feet away, his image blurred by the rain driving into Tyrell's face.

"You look fucked up, man," said Cisneros. "There's no reason be fucked up. This is a good place."

Tyrell spat out a sardonic laugh. "Oh, right!"

"You having a bad time, man?" Cisneros chuckled. "Just take it easy. Relax. God is here."

"God?" A chill began to map Tyrell's spine; his scrotum tightened, and he blinked away the raindrops, trying to bring Cisneros into clearer focus. He felt at the center of a grayish green confusion, a medium without form, without border, the only real thing in a vast unreality. "What do you mean . . . 'God'?"

"I'm not talking 'bout Jesus," said Cisneros with another sly chuckle. "Oh, no! I'm not talking 'bout Jesus."

"Well, what *are* you talking about?"

"It's interesting," said Cisneros. "I wonder if the idea of God was based

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on a premonition of what exists here. It's possible, you know. It's obvious there are some outstanding similarities between the laws of karma, certain Christian tenets, and the true process of the—" he sniffed, amused "—the divine."

Cisneros' unnatural fluency and abstract self-absorption disconcerted Tyrell; he'd always been one to put on airs, but because he had nothing intelligent to say, the effect had been ludicrous. Now the effect was a little scary.

The rain intensified, and Cisneros wavered like a mirage. Something was dangling from his hand, swinging back and forth, and peering through the rain, Tyrell saw that it was an eight-pointed star that had been crudely carved from a piece of seashell, holed, and strung on a length of twine.

"What's that?" Tyrell asked.

"Just something I made . . . while I was waiting for you." Cisneros flipped the star high, grabbed it in his fist. "Things have changed for me, Jack. I'm not the man I used to be."

"None of us are," said Tyrell, trying to make light of it and taking a backward step.

"That's true," said Cisneros. "More than that. It's the only truth."

Tyrell noticed for the first time that the rain didn't seem to bother Cisneros: it was trickling into his eyes, yet he never even blinked. He wanted to run, but he didn't know if there was a secure place to hide, and neither did he know what he would be hiding from.

"Tell me about God, Bert," he said, deciding against fear, hoping that this Cisneros' behavior was merely derangement resulting from exposure and fatigue.

"You really want that, Jack? You don't look like the kind of man cares too much 'bout God. But—" he twirled his little star on its string "—if you want to hear, you come to the right place. 'Cause I'm the man's going to tell everybody 'bout God . . . soon as I get off this island, that's what I'm going to do. Going to preach the truth 'bout the God that is and the world that isn't." His smile seemed the product of absolute serenity. "You understand?"

"Not hardly," said Tyrell. "Explain it to me."

"This world," said Cisneros, waving at the pines, "it's nothing but a dream." He giggled. "Thing is, nobody knows who's doing the dreaming. Nobody 'cept me."

"And who's that?"

"And when I tell everybody," Cisneros went on, ignoring the question, "when I tell 'em nothing's all there is, that anything they do is all right, 'cause there's nothing for anybody to hurt, it's all a dream . . . then there's going to be chaos. Maybe it'll be blood and sex and madness. A

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beautiful chaos of dreams. But maybe it'll be the beginning of a new and glorious possibility. I believe that might just be the case."

Tyrell kept up his bold front. "Is that so, Bert?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Nobody's going to believe you . . . an illiterate little Portugee. They'll laugh your ass back to New Bedford."

"Want me to prove it, Jack? They've taught me how to do quite a few tricks. I'm sure I can find one that'll impress you."

"I'd love it. Go ahead . . . show me your stuff."

"It'll be my pleasure." Cisneros' smile broadened, displaying his gold teeth; his dark, seamed face looked to have an impish, stylized evil, its detail lost in the streaming rain. Then the face began to pale. "Dreams, Jack. That's all there is. Dreams like me, like you. Like your girlfriend back in the shack."

Tyrell started to ask how he had known about Astrid, but alarm stifled his curiosity, held him motionless and cold. Cisneros was fading, growing vague and indistinct, becoming a ghost in the rain; but his voice remained clear.

"You remember this, Jack, when you think you know something. You know nothing, man. Nothing. You're smoke, you're haze on the water, you're not even real as the dew. And what you feel and what you know is even less than that. Think of yourself as a spark flying up against the darkness, visible for a moment, then gone. But not gone forever, Jack. Gone forever, that's for real things, things that live and die. You're in the wind, a pattern, a shape that what's real calls back now and again to play with, to make new dreams, to amuse itself. You're part of a game, a play."

Cisneros had almost completely disappeared; all that remained of him was a roughly human shape hollowed from the rain, an indistinct opacity against the backdrop of the pines.

"Dreams," came Cisneros' voice, a sonorous whisper rising above the keening of the wind. "Sometimes they're beautiful, Jack. Beautiful and slow and serene."

More lightning in the east, accompanied by a savage crack of thunder.

"But sometimes they're nightmares."

7

How, Cisneros thought, could he have sunk to the depths that he had in his former life? How could he have been such a posturing bully, a tormentor of women and the weak? He supposed that—like most of his friends—he had been enslaved by tradition, by the spiritual and physical

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meanness of life among the Portuguese of New Bedford. It was for certain that his father's constant abuse of his mother had informed his own behavior, and he had not been able to rise above those origins. Well, now he had been given a chance for redemption . . . more, his lifelong desire for knowledge and the skills with which to employ it had been satisfied, and he planned to take full advantage of the opportunity. And in the process of spreading the truth he would make up all the bad times to his wife and children, to everyone whom he had wronged. He, unlike Tyrell, had untapped potential; he was capable of change. He knew how foolish it was to take pride in himself considering his ephemeral nature; but although he was merely a creation, an illusion, that was no excuse to ignore the decencies or to deny his potential. Even if Tyrell were able to accept the way things were, which Cisneros doubted, he would never be able to maintain his humanity; he was not strong, not resilient. It was a pity, but Cisneros had no time to spare on pity. He had a world to teach, to enlighten, and Tyrell's fate was not his concern. Later he'd have another try at talking with him. But for now there was so much to learn, so much to understand. He let himself fade into the dream and the deep places beneath it, where he communed with the trillion forms of the Creator.

8

It was almost twilight, the storm still raging, before Tyrell screwed up the courage to approach the bunker. He was soaked to the skin, his sweater a foul-smelling matte of drenched wool, and he was shaking with cold; yet he stood at the side of the bunker for quite some time, leery of knowing what lay within. Huge slate-colored waves marbled with foam piled in from the sea, crashing explosively on the eroded beach, driving a thin tide to the bunker's lip, then retreating, leaving a slope of tawny sand cut by deep channels; the wind flattened the grass at the crest of the dunes. But despite the ferocity of the elements, Tyrell sensed that the worst of the weather was past, that by morning the sea would be calm and the sky clear and any fire set upon the beach would be noticed by the keeper of the Gay Head lighthouse. One more night, then, and he would be safe. But that one night loomed endlessly before him, and he realized that—if from nothing else—he was in peril from the terrors of his mind. That, he thought now, must be the cause of all he had seen and felt. The trauma of the fire aboard the *Preciosilla*, of the swim to shore . . . these things must have unhinged him in some way, because he was not about to believe in what he had seen. And in order to quell

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his fears, he had to look inside the bunker, to begin ordering his mind, firming it against the solitude of the night to come.

Finally, steeling himself, he made his way down the slope, sinking to mid-calf with every step in the wet sand. He paused at the corner of the bunker, drawing strength from the power of the sea, filling his chest with its power, its briny smell; then he slogged around the corner and peered in over the lip. He felt relief on seeing Cisneros lying curled up in the shadow of the lip, still wearing his black slicker and jeans, his face turned to the wall.

"Bert!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

Cisneros didn't move; cobwebs bridged between his body and the bunker wall, and more cobwebs formed a linkage between his ankles, his knees. No spiders in sight . . . not on his body, anyway. And not as many as there had been on the fouled walls and ceiling.

"Come on, Bert," he said, with a real wealth of anxiety and pleading in his voice. "Get the fuck up!"

Maybe he *was* dead, Tyrell thought. And what did that say about Astrid? He'd half-talked himself into believing that she hadn't been real. He shouted again, and again there was no response. He drew a breath, held it, leaned in over the lip and poked Cisneros with a forefinger.

The finger sank knuckle-deep into Cisneros' shoulder, and Tyrell felt ticklish movement along its length.

He cried out in shock, fell back. Cisneros' body appeared to ripple, to shift, and as Tyrell watched, it began to break apart, the realistic-looking slicker, the jeans, the seam of swarthy skin visible between the ragged black hair and the slicker's collar, all of this dissolving into a myriad separate white shapes, thousands and thousands of spiders spilling, crawling over one another, proving that the body had been composed of nothing but tiny arachnid forms, a boiling nest of little horrors, a tide of them that scuttled across the floor and fumed toward him over the edge of the lip.

Tyrell screamed and screamed, scrambling away from the bunker, falling, wriggling on his back, then crawling toward the sea, right to the verge, into cold water. He sat up, staring at the bunker. The spiders had not followed him; they were poised on the lip, all in a row, riding one another, a fringe of them several inches thick, and he had the idea that they were watching him, amused by his panic. He got to his feet, gasping, choking on fear, and there was an explosion at his back. He turned just in time to be knocked flat by an enormous breaker that dragged him over the coarse sand of the slope. He scrambled up, coughing up salt water. The mass of spiders was still perched on the lip, still watching him. He started to his right. Stopped. Went to his left. Stopped. A sob loosened in his chest, his eyes filled.

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"Oh, Jesus God," he said, singing it out above the pitch of the wind. "Please don't do this!"

A lesser wave broke at his back, sending a flow of chill water to rushing about his knees.

"Please," he said. "I don't want this anymore."

He wished there was someone who would answer, someone to whom he could appeal this thoroughly unfair circumstance. That, he thought, would be his best hope. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But at last, having no other option, he began to run, giving the bunker a wide berth, pumping his knees, mounting the dune and cresting it, picking his way nimbly through the overgrown craters, through the pines. He came to feel light in running, as if each step might lift him high above the island, even above the storm, and seizing upon this comforting irrationality among all the terrifying irrationalities that ruled over No-mans Land, he thought he might be able to run forever or until he dropped or until something even more irrational happened, something that through terror or pain would free him once and for all from the fear that for so long had ruled over him.

Night, a toiling darkness illuminated by strokes of red lightning that spread down the darkness like cracks in a black and fragile shell, and a flickering orange light was shining beneath the ill-fitting door of Astrid's shack. Tyrell stood in the pines, hugging himself for warmth, his teeth chattering, chilled to the bone. Hallucinations, she'd said. Maybe that had been responsible for all that had happened. Hallucinations brought on by the spiders' venom. If her version of things was accurate—hallucinations. Bert dead—then he had nothing to fear inside the shack. He wanted badly to believe her, because then he could get warm. Warmth seemed the most important quality in all the world, and he realized he was going to have to give it priority very soon or else he was not going to survive. He kept edging nearer to the shack, stopping, listening, hoping to pick up some sign of occupancy and from that sign to gauge the nature of the occupant. But the only sounds were the pissing of the rain in the pine boughs, the moaning of the wind, and the occasional concussion from the sky.

Tyrell crept to the side of the door, peered in through a gap in the boards, but could make out nothing apart from blurred orange light. He could feel the warmth inside, steaming out at him, and its allure drew him to pull the door open. The shack was empty. After a moment's hesitation he ducked inside, closed the door behind him. He stripped off his clothing, wrapped himself in one of the blankets and stood by the hotplate, warming his hands over the coils, standing there until his shaking had stopped. Then he sat down on the sleeping bag, covered

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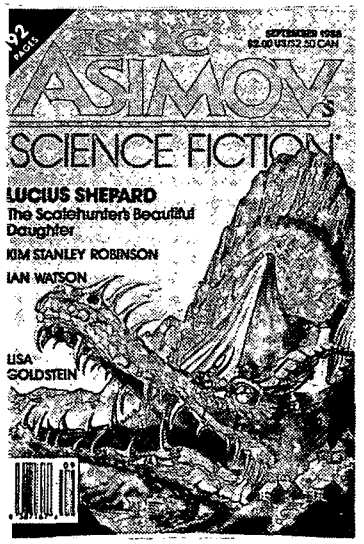

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himself with a second blanket, and stared blankly at the ceiling, where dozens of white spiders patrolled the intricate strands of their webs. He felt weak in every joint, every extremity, too weak to consider doing anything about the spiders, and he became mesmerized by their delicate movements; there seemed to be patterns involved in their shifting, at the heart of which was the maintenance of a structure, a constant process of adjustment, of equalization. He laughed at himself. *Christ, he was really losing it!* He settled back against the wall, let his eyes close; the light of the hurricane lamp acquired a dim yellowish-orange value through his lids, like the color of a summer sunset, a clean, sweet color, and it seemed he was falling into it, drifting away on a calm breeze that carried him beyond this storm, beyond all storms.

He came awake to find Astrid looking down at him, shrugging out of her slicker. He sat up, tension cabling the muscles in his neck and shoulders, waiting for her to change back into a corpse. But no change occurred. She ran her hands along the sides of her head, pulling the damp heft of her hair into a sleek ponytail.

"I was worried about you," she said. "I didn't know where you'd gone."

He had trouble mustering speech. "I . . . uh . ." He swallowed. "It was those hallucinations you talked about. I woke up and I saw something that frightened me."

"What did you see?" She kneeled beside him, and he had to restrain himself from scrambling away.

He told her what he'd seen in the shack, in the bunker; once he had finished he laughed nervously and said, "When you said there could be hallucinations, I didn't think you had anything that bad in mind."

She plucked at a wisp of grass, her features cast in a somber expression. "I have to tell you the truth," she said. "I don't suppose it's very important whether or not you believe me. Or maye it is . . . maybe it's important in some way I don't understand. But I do have to tell you."

He felt something bad coming; a sour cold heaviness seemed to be collecting in his gut, and the weakness in his limbs grew more profound.

"I came here in the summer of 1964," she said. "I . . ." She broke off, reacting to his horrified stare. "I'm not a ghost . . . not in the way you think. Not any more than you are."

"What the hell's that mean?"

"Just listen," she said, "It's going to be very hard for you to believe this, and you won't have a chance of understanding unless you listen carefully and hear me out. All right?"

He nodded, too frightened to move, to do other than listen.

"I came here in '64," she continued. "To study the spiders. I'd heard about them from a botanist who'd spent some time on the island, and I'd seen a specimen. That was enough to convince me that we were dealing

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with an entirely new sub-species and not just a variant. Their poison, in particular, fascinated me. It incorporated an incredibly complex DNA. . . . Do you know what that is? DNA?"

"I've a fair idea," he said.

"Okay." She put her hand to her brow, pinched the bridge of her nose, a gesture—it seemed to Tyrell—of weariness. "God, there's so much to tell!"

This sign of weakness on her part boosted his confidence. "Go ahead. We've got all night."

"At least that," she said; she drew a breath, let it sigh out. "Aside from the DNA, I found what appeared to be fragments of human RNA in the poison." She looked at him questioningly.

"Something to do with memory, storing memory or something . . . is that right?"

"Near enough."

Wind curled in beneath the door to rustle the dry grasses carpeting the floor; the flame of the hurricane lamp flickered, brightened, and a tide of orange light momentarily eroded the edge of the shadows on the walls. The rain had let up to a drizzle, and the thunder had quit altogether; the storm, Tyrell realized, was nearing its end. For some reason this made him anxious. He was not feeling very well. He kept wishing for something solid, some edifice of thought, to hang onto; but there was nothing within reach, and this caused him even more anxiety. He tried to focus on Astrid's words.

"Anyway," she went on, "after a week or so I ran up against some pretty frightening questions. The poison, I'd discovered, was unbelievably potent. I figured that death would follow within seconds of a bite. Yet I'd been bitten many times and I was still alive. And I couldn't understand how the spiders had been isolated on the island. Surely, I thought, they must have been carried off on the boats that had landed here over the years ever since the Indians occupied the land. And if that had been the case, given their hardiness, their breeding capacity, there wouldn't be too many people left alive. Without a sophisticated technology, there was no way an antidote could have been produced. The poison was extremely complex." Another sigh. "Then I began having dreams."

Tyrell remembered Cisneros, his ravings. "What kind of dreams?"

"They weren't dreams, they were experiences of other lives. Men, women, children. All from different eras, some of them Indian lives from pre-colonial times. None earlier than that. It wasn't that I was watching them. I was inside their heads, living their days and nights. And it was from these dreams that I began to understand the truth, that the spiders *had* been transported off-island . . . a long, long time ago. They'd been carried to the mainland, back to Europe on the colonial vessels and then

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gradually had spread to Asia, Africa. Everywhere. By my estimate their population had come to span the world by the mid-nineteenth century. I very much doubt that humanity survived into the twentieth. Of course what I know of human history belies that . . . that's part of their fabrication. But in reality the last hundred years or so of mankind must have been awful. People dying and dying. The population shrinking to a mere handful of souls who hadn't been bitten."

It took him a long moment to absorb what she had said. "Now wait a minute! We're living proof of . . ."

"No, we're not," she said. "We're not alive. We never were." He tried to interrupt, but she talked over him. "I don't fully understand it. Or perhaps I do. I can't be sure. It's difficult to explain things in human terms, because though the spiders with their poison have managed to ensure a kind of human survival, I have no idea of their motivations . . . or if they even have motivations. This may all be just reflex on their part. Or maybe it's that they've become a unity, intelligent in a way, because of a symbiotic use of our genetic material. A group mind or something of the sort. Maybe the best analogy would be to say . . . Have you heard about the concept of people's personalities being translated into computer software? That's similar to what the spiders have done. Transformed our genetic material into a biological analogue of software." She blew out a sharp breath between her pursed lips. "Sometimes it seems to me that it's all a game to them, a pageant, this continuation of the history of a dead race. The way they appear to attach special significance to this island, and the human creations involved, like you and me, it's as if they develop a fondness for them. They bring them back over and over, and occasionally they'll let them live—" she laughed "—happily. As if they were celebrating us, thanking us for what we've done for them by dying, by giving them a new level of consciousness." She took his hand. "Do you remember asking me why it was that one moment I'd be looking at you with longing, and the next I'd be frightened? It's because I think they mean for us to live happily for a while, and I want it so much, I don't want to lose the chance. Maybe it's only a dream, an illusion. But it feels so good, so strong, to be even this much alive compared to what I've been . . . almost nothing, a flicker of consciousness subsumed into a hive of dreams."

He pulled his hand away from her. "You're fucking crazy!"

"I know that's how it sounds . . ."

"No, it doesn't *sound* crazy. It *is* crazy!" He drew up his knees, shifted deeper into the corner; the lamplight fell across his toes, and when he pulled them back into shadow he felt much more secure. "You sit here and tell me that we're the figments of the imagination of a bunch of

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goddamn spiders, and that they've been carrying out the evolution of human history in this fantasy kingdom they've created . . ."

"Yes, I . . ."

"And you expect me to swallow *that?* Jesus Christ, woman!"

"I'd think," she said stiffly, "that of all people you'd be able to comprehend it . . . what with your living in a fantasy of your own all these years."

"When it comes to fantasy, lady, I can't hold a candle to you."

"It's not so alien as it seems," she said. "Philosophers have been . . ."

He snorted in contempt.

". . . saying more or less the same thing for centuries. Think about it. Didn't your friend say what I have? Didn't he?"

His shock at her knowing what Cisneros had said must have showed on his face, because she laughed.

"How could I have known that?" she said. "Unless his truth had been communicated to me through dreams." Again she took his hand. "You'll understand sooner or later. It's always hard for those of us who're brought to the island to accept. It's like waking up to find you're dreaming. But eventually you become sensitized to what they intend, what their patterns are, their tendencies."

Tyrell shook free of her, his mind whirling. Was everything he'd seen and felt since his arrival a hallucination? That couldn't be right. The hallucination theory, that was *hers* . . . no, she'd denied that one when she'd tried to convince him about the spiders. So maybe it *was* right. Maybe all this had been a fever dream, maybe he was lying passed out in the bunker, or maybe even back in his berth aboard the *Preciosilla* . . . His thoughts went skittering off into the corners of his brain, hiding like spiders in the convolutions, and he sat empty and unknowing, bewildered by the infinity of confusions accessible to him. Astrid said something, but he refused to listen, certain that whatever she would tell him would only offer more confusion. He could hear his thoughts ticking in secret, little bombs waiting to explode. His heart was ticking, too. The entire world was running on the same pulse, building and building to an explosive moment. He closed his eyes, and the light seemed to be growing brighter, more solid, to pry beneath his lids with thin glowing orange talons.

"Jack! Look at me!"

Oh, no! He remembered what had happened the last time he'd had a look at her.

"Are you all right, Jack?"

Let me be, damn you!

She was very near, her breath warm on his cheek, and he couldn't resist taking a peek. That close to him, her face was a touch distorted;

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but it *was* her face. Strong Scandinavian features framed by hair like white gold. She looked beautiful in her concern, and he didn't trust that. Not one bit.

"Don't leave me, Jack," she said. "You have to understand . . . they've given us a chance to live, for more of a life than anyone else can have. But you have to accept things, you can't go against them. They'll simply . . . stop you. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . . yes, I understand."

He couldn't take his eyes off her, waiting for the smooth skin and icy eyes and white teeth to give way to corruption and poked bone.

"Do you remember earlier?" she asked. "Making love?"

"Uh-huh."

"Make love to me now. I want to feel that way again."

Her face drew closer yet, and he knew what the plan was now. They would wait until he was kissing her to make the change, and he would find himself kissing death, his tongue probing into a joyless void of rotted gums and broken teeth. Revolted, he shoved her hard, sending her back against the table. Her head struck the corner, cutting short her scream, and she fell on her side. He sat there, breathing rapidly, expecting her to get up. Then he noticed the blood miring the back of her pale blond head.

"Astrid!"

He threw off the blanket, crawled over to her, searched for a pulse.

She was dead.

Well, he thought, that proved she was wrong. You had to be alive in order to die.

Didn't you?

He was repelled by his insensitivity, by how casually he could accept the death of this woman with whom he had made love only hours before.

But maybe they *hadn't* made love, maybe . . .

He scrambled to his feet. Time to stop this shit, stop this ridiculous metaphysical merry-go-round. He'd killed a woman. She'd been a lunatic, but he was liable for the act, and he'd damn well better cover his tracks. He struggled into his wet clothes, trying to think; but his thoughts were muddy, circulating with sluggish inefficiency. Then in pulling on his trousers he lurched into the table and nearly overturned the lamp. He grabbed it by the handle, held it above the table a moment. A mad little thought crackled in his head. Kill two birds with one stone, he would. He wedged his feet into his shoes, avoiding looking at the body. But as he shrugged on his slicker, his eyes fell upon it and emotion tightened his chest. A tear leaked down onto his cheek.

"Aw, Jesus!" he said. "I didn't mean to."

As if Jesus were listening.

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He made promises to God. *Lord,* he said to himself, *get me out of this. I swear I'll live a clean life. I'll go back to Ireland, I'll take a stand for God and country.*

And then he chastised himself for his weakness. He'd done the deed, and he'd have to face up to the consequences.

Damn! Did every fucking thing you decided about your life, your morality, sound as feckless and as unattached to reality as the things he was trying to decide?

He backed to the door, pushed it open and held the lamp high. Astrid's body receded into shadow; only her feet were in the light. He said a prayer for her, for himself. Then he dashed down the lamp, and as the grass upon the floor burst into flames, he sprinted out into the darkness.

Within seconds, the entire shack was ablaze, flames snapping, shooting into the starless sky, high and bright enough that they would surely be seen by the keeper at Gay Head. Tyrell had become so accustomed to the violence of the storm that the relative calmness of the night felt unnatural, inimical. He glanced behind him, expecting some threat to show itself; but there were only the pines, the faintly stirring dark. When he turned back to the shack, however, the threat he had feared materialized.

It was a spectacular sight, the flames leaping, wisping into thin smoke and sparks that shot out into eloquent curves over the pinetops, and the shack itself a skeleton with molten knots of fire peeping between the boards . . . so spectacular, in fact, that at first Tyrell didn't notice movement inside the building. And when he did notice it, something dark and spindly twisting and rippling behind a wall of flame, he thought it merely some internal structure being eaten by the fire. But then that something came toward the door, paused in the doorway, a black streaming figure with fiery hair and stick-thin limbs, reminding him of the captain in the burning wheelhouse of the *Preciosilla.* But he knew this was not the captain. The figure stood for a few seconds without moving; then, with the slow precision of a signalman, it began to wave its arm back and forth, back and forth, each repetition of the gesture charging Tyrell with the voltage of fear. He would have liked to bellow, to scream, to roar, anything to release the tension inside him; but he was enervated, on the verge of collapse, and he managed only a muted squawk. The muscles of his jaw trembled, and his heart seemed to have tripled its rhythm, less beating than quivering in the hollow of his chest.

He was too frightened to turn his back on the burning figure, and he retreated slowly, carefully, feeling behind him, brushing aside clumps of wet needles, dragging his feet so he wouldn't stumble and pitch over into one of the craters. Only after he had put a hundred yards between himself and the shack, its fierce reddish orange glow, like that of a miniature sun fallen from the heavens, casting the pine trunks in stark

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silhouette . . . only then did he run, breaking free of the pines, climbing to the crest of the dune overlooking the bunker, and there sinking to his knees. Neither exhausted nor out of breath, of strength, but rather totally confused, seeing no point in further flight. He sat cross-legged, watching the amber sweep of the Gay Head light across the bottom of pale scudding clouds, feeling empty, hollow, barely registering the gentle touch of the wind on his face, watching the pitch and roil of the sea, which was still heavy and running high.

"Hello, Jack," said a man's voice to his right.

Nothing could shock Tyrell anymore. He felt a prickle of cold traipse along his neck like the tip-toeing of a spider, but nothing more. He turned his head a quarter of an arc and saw a man standing some ten or twelve feet away. A most unusual man, a man who in outline displayed the short, bandy-legged form of Bert Cisneros, complete to the shape of the wool hat atop his head, but whose substance was the blue darkness of the night sky beset with a sprinkling of white many-pointed stars.

"That you, Bert?" asked Tyrell.

"More or less," said Cisneros. "You know how it is."

"No, I don't, Bert. Maybe that's my problem. I don't have a fucking clue about how it is."

"I tried to tell you." Cisneros flung out a starry arm, gesturing inland. "And so did she."

The stars in his body were moving, shifting into strange alignments, like living constellations. It was troubling to see, and Tyrell lowered his eyes to the sand.

"Was that the truth, then?" he asked.

"The truth." Cisneros laughed. "No matter how illusory a species we are, every man's still his own truth. I've heard you say much the same thing, Jack."

"Did I, now? I wonder what I meant by it."

"You'll understand soon enough."

An immense slow wave lifted from the dark, towering over the beach, and came crashing down, its vast tonnage exploding into splinters of white spray. The smell of brine was strong.

"So what's to happen now?" asked Tyrell.

"For you?"

"Yeah, for me."

"I'm afraid you're just not cut out for the next part," said Cisneros. "It sometimes happens that the created prove unsuitable. Not even the creators are infallible."

Tyrell sniffed. "I was ever a disappointment to my mother, too." He was silent a moment, tracing a line in the sand with his forefinger. "I'd like to believe that Astrid's alive somehow . . . that either what you're

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saying's true, or else that I'm round my fucking twist and none of this is happening."

"Don't worry about it," said Cisneros. "Nothing I tell you is going to be a solid assurance one way or the other. It's not in your nature to accept that from me. But you've done nothing to be ashamed of . . . not really."

"From all you're telling me, Bert, can I assume that given your version of reality is accurate, we still have a bit of free will left to us."

"If you want to call it that. Things are little different from how you always thought they were. The only salient difference is that instead of an unknown mystical creator, there's a knowable, explicable one. Of course in the beginning—" Cisneros shrugged "—who can say?"

Tyrell glanced at him, then away. "Even if you are an hallucination, you're still an asshole. I never could figure how an ignorant git like yourself could think he knew *any*thing. But maybe you do know something now. Whatever, you *are* a changed man, Bert. And I'm not talking about the suit of special effects. Quite erudite, you are. They must have something important in mind for you."

"It's as I told you," said Cisneros. "As I've shown you. I am to instruct with words and miracles. To invest the play with a new spirit. Who knows what the result may be?"

"You sound pretty much in control, Bert. You sure about that? You sure the fucking spiders haven't got something nasty in mind for you? I mean, how come an asshole like you, a real punk . . . how come you get to win the world?"

"God works in mysterious ways."

A broken laugh guttered out between Tyrell's teeth. "I wish I could buy all this crap."

"So do I, Jack. So do I." Cisneros sidled off a couple of feet. "I'm going to leave you now. Things are at an end here, and I can't help you. Perhaps someday we'll meet again. You never know."

"I suppose I should be hoping for that eventually," said Tyrell without taking his eyes from the patch of sand before him. "But tell you truth. I don't hope for it very much."

When he looked up after a minute or so, Cisneros was gone. But he was not alone. Horribly burned, her face melted and blackened, her eyes like shattered opaque crystals, breasts smeared into shapeless masses, bone showing through the crispy meat of her right leg, Astrid was standing where Cisneros had been. Tyrell's gorge rose, his fear returned. But nonetheless he remained sitting on the dunetop. "Go away, damn you," he said.

He heard a horrid wheezing and recognized it for the sound of air passing in and out of charred lungs; the breeze rustled frays of burned

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skin on her arms. He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, God!" he said. "Just let me be for a little while, all right? Just let me be."

A throaty husk of a noise, speech trying to issue from her throat.

"Ahh!" He pushed himself erect, tripped, rolled down the face of the dune. He got to one knee, gazed back up to the crest. For a moment he thought she had vanished, but then the Gay Head light flashed across her, etching an image into Tyrell's mind: a female thing with black crusted thighs, her flesh displaying shiny fracture lines like overlapping slabs of anthracite, blind eyes, and bits of papery skin fluttering like hanks of hair from her skull in the fitful wind. The image wouldn't fit inside his head. It kept expanding, forcing out thoughts, until there was no room for anything else, and still it continued to expand, driving a hoarse cry out of his chest, sending him staggering toward the edge of the shore.

He couldn't see Astrid, but he felt the push of her vision, and to escape that he waded out into the water, going waist-deep, breasting into a crawl that took him flush into a breaking wave. He dived underwater into the heart of the wave, felt it billow above him, and surfaced in a trough so deep that he could not locate the shore. The water was terribly cold, but after a few seconds his flesh grew numb, and this lack of sensation inspired him. He stroked away from the island, realizing that this way led to death, but no longer caring, no longer willing to suffer the obscenities that sprouted from the darkness of Nomans Land. Another wave lifted above him, and again he dived into its heart, surfacing far beyond it. All around, the sea was peaking into enormous waves whose flowing slopes carried him high, then sent him hurtling into pitch-black valleys. He tried to swim, but it was futile. The weight of his soaked clothing was dragging him under, and his feeble strokes were merely exertion, serving no purpose. Fear overwhelmed him. A cry formed in his throat. But as he went slipping into yet another valley, the momentum of that rushing decline dissipated the cry and he felt exhilarated, like a child on a carnival ride. He went under, came up choking, flailing, spitting salt water. The tilting side of a swell bore him under a second time. He beat his way to the surface, thrusting his head into the air, knowing that he was drowning, that the cold had robbed him of strength, regretting now his decision to flee the island, regretting everything, his lost opportunities, his failures, the loss of fleeting moments of happiness, so few by comparison to the long periods of doldrums that had dominated his life. But as he sank for a last time, a white nail driving itself into the black flesh of the sea, at the core of his panic and regret was a profound satisfaction, the knowledge that he was dying, *really* dying, that madness had afflicted him and nothing of what he had undergone on the island had the least reality. That he was a man and not a pale

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imagined thing. He had a moment of bitterness amidst his fear. What had he done to deserve this? He was no worse than most, no more a coward or charlatan. He didn't think these things as much as he experienced them in a bleak current of emotion, and once that current had exhausted itself, he accepted—along with the unfairness of life—the cold embrace of the sea and sank twisting into the depths, his arms floating up with the grace of a slow dancer, his lungs filling, his mind growing as black and serene as the water surrounding him, dwindling to a point of ebony stillness that seemed to hang in a suspension, a peaceful place between dread and the object of dread in which he perceived the pure thing of his soul, his essential things, touched them, found them strong and unafraid, and then, this necessary business done, he went without reservation about the small and final business of dying.

9

Two nights after being rescued by the Coast Guard from Nomans Land, Bert Cisneros sat at a round table in the Atlantic Cafe on Nantucket, where just that afternoon he had been interviewed by members of a review board assembled by the Maritime Union and by the owners of the *Preciosilla*. He was accompanied by two friends from New Bedford, sailors who were in aspect and temperament much like his former self and were from the fishing vessel *Cariño*, which had put into port during the storm and was undergoing engine repairs. One of these men, Jose Nascimento, after listening to the relation of Cisneros' adventures, asked if this was the story he had told the investigative board.

"No," said Cisneros. "The time wasn't right then to begin the process of illumination."

His companions exchanged looks of concern; they had never heard their friend speak in this manner.

"But now," Cisneros went on, "now the time has come." His gaze swept over the dark, monkeylike faces of his companions. "You don't believe anything I've said, do you?"

"Hey, Bert," said Nascimento. "You been through some rough shit, man."

"That's right," said the second man, Arcoles Gil. "You be well pretty soon. Just take it easy, have another beer."

"Don't you notice a difference in me?" Cisneros asked.

"Well," said Gil, "you talkin' funny, that's for sure."

"It's not just my way of speaking that's changed," said Cisneros. "I've changed totally. When I think back to the man I was, the things I did, particularly to women . . ."

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"You gotta hit a woman sometimes, man," said Nascimento. "Shit, Bert. You know that. Sometimes they put you in a position where you ain't got no choice . . . where if you don't hit 'em, they cut off your balls."

Cisneros felt sad for Nascimento. Looking at his friend was like looking into a mirror that reflected his own foulness, his own brutal stupidity. It would be easy now, given his new perspective, to try and put his old life behind him, to hide his past away and neglect his friends in the interests of complacency and contentment. But Bert Cisneros was a man of honor. It was his duty, his trust, to bring enlightenment to men like Nascimento. To all men.

"When I think back," he said, "despite the fact that I realize my entire life is a beautifully articulated fantasy, I'm sick to my stomach." He paused, thoughtfully rubbing the little eight-pointed star he had brought from the island with the tips of his fingers. "I often wonder if the violent dream the spiders have made of the twentieth century is an accurate reflection of what would have occurred had humanity survived . . . if through some biochemical genius they've managed to predict the twists and turns that would have resulted from human greed and lust. I don't suppose the answer's important any longer. Now that I've been called to inform the world of its insubstantial nature, perhaps things will be returned to a kind of normalcy. Perhaps we'll be able to regain control of our destiny . . . no matter how illusory it is. After all, who can judge the potentials of an illusion? But I really believe they want something good for us."

The men's faces displayed emotions ranging from pity to alarm, and Cisneros laughed. "Come, my friends," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll prove it to you." They remained seated. "Come! I'll prove it in a way you won't be able to deny. I'll show you what the world really looks like. Come on!"

Grudgingly, they followed him through the crowd at the bar to the door of the cafe, and then along the sidewalk until they came to the main street of the town. Buildings of brick and wood frame, cobblestones, a few cars moving, pedestrians looking into hotly lit shop windows. Graceful old trees leaning in over the rooftops.

"What do you see?" Cisneros asked.

Gil and Nascimento once again exchanged concerned glances.

"The street," said Gil with a puzzled expression.

"No," said Cisnero. "You see a dream. I'll show you the *street*."

He concentrated his will, and within seconds the scene before him rippled, wavered, like something melting in the rain, and in its place, lit by a bone-white full moon, was a ruin. Sad fragments of another time, another dream. The broken shells of a handful of weathered gray houses fettered in ivy, their windows shattered, half-hidden by brush and oak

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and hawthorne; the cobblestones were thick with moss. Mice scampered in the complex skeins of shadow beneath the boughs. Something long and yellowish brown protruded from a pile of leaves—a human bone. They were probably all around, he realized, the bones of the spiders' last victims. And spanning between limbs of trees, the cross-pieces of windows, everywhere, were veils of cobwebs tenanted by white spiders. After the bustle of the street of dreams, the emptiness of reality was harrowing. The age and solitude of the place made Cisneros feel old, as if the weight of years was a kind of contagion.

"There . . . you see," said Cisneros, turning to his friends.

But they, along with the shops and the cars and the pedestrians, had vanished.

Cisneros was startled but not afraid. Perhaps, he thought, he had misunderstood the discretion of his control; perhaps it was impossible to reveal the totality of the actual without eliminating all observers. Of course, he told himself. That must be it. He tried to reinhabit the world of the dream, but—and this did frighten him—he could not remember how it was done. The knowledge of how to manipulate the materials of the unreal had seemed innate, as uncomplicated and natural a process as breathing, and yet now . . . he ran a little ways forward into the center of the deserted street, panicked, slipping on the damp mossy stones. He tried again, focusing all his will on the act of return, clenching his fists, squeezing his eyes shut. But when he opened them he discovered that nothing had changed. He could sense the forms and tensions of the dream just beyond his range, just out of reach, tantalizing, unattainable. They had tricked him, the spiders had been playing with him, weaving another duplicitous web of his deepest needs and desires. He whirled around, expecting to see some vast trap closing on him; but there were only the shattered buildings, the trees, the desolation, and he realized that the trap had already been sprung. They had raised him high and left him in a place where wit and knowledge had no audience, no meaning, and thus were a torment.

The ruins appeared to be closing down around him, the network of shadows shrinking to encage him. The bone-knob moon with its scatter of ashy markings looked to have lowered and been caught in the fork of two oak limbs, pinning him in place with its strong light. Rustles and skitterings from within the abandoned houses. Something tickled his cheek; he brushed at it, and a spider came away on his hand, perched like an ornate ring on the middle joint of his forefinger. With a shout, he knocked it off. The sound of his fear was swallowed by the silence.

Despair heavied him, and he dropped to his knees, wanting to call upon God, but understanding now the futility of prayer, full of useless comprehensions. Why had they done this? He had believed in them, in the possibility of repentance. He would have entertained them, given

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new complexity to an old, old game, and they had betrayed him. Or perhaps they had not, perhaps fate was a matter of chemistry. That could be it, he thought. What if all personality and fate were the resolution of biochemical laws that the spiders enacted in their dream of the human world? Perhaps they had merely allowed him to act out the essential directives of his personality? More useless insight. He clasped his hands behind his head, trying to hold in his fear, to stop thought, and yet thinking, thinking, always thinking, imagining now that the last men living in these ruins, in other ruins all over the world, must have felt this same desolation and bewilderment, bereft of love and the possibility of salvation, of the least good thing. He tracked his gaze across the ruins of Nantucket Town, taking in the gaunt oaks and their skeletal shadows, the blind windows, the husks of old grog shops and apothecaries, and feeling in the depths of his soul the hopelessness of his circumstance, he let out a terrified wail, a white plume of a cry that seemed to go up and up, arcing out over the emptiness, carrying with it all the fears and cares and heart of the single, solitary inhabitant of that endless country of failed dreams and broken lives known as Nomans Land. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have a rousing, good old-fashioned Cowboys and Dinosaurs story for you next month, as **Sharon N. Farber** returns with our November cover story, "The Last Thunder Horse West of the Mississippi." What, you've never *heard* of Cowboy and Dinosaur stories before? Well, you have a treat in store for you then, as Farber takes us on a fast and funny romp through the Old West, in company with a bizarre and eclectic cast of characters—most of whom are real historical personages! **Somtow Sucharitkul** (also known these days as **S.P. Somtow**) is also on hand for November, returning to these pages after a long absence to take us along on a sinister journey on the old Orient Express, through snow-choked forests and across the desolate, moon-lit expanses of the moors, to discover the dreadful fate that awaits "The Madonna of the Wolves"—*this* is one that will keep you awake at nights, believe us. From the far past of the American West and nineteenth Century Europe, **John Shirley** then takes us ahead to the not-too-distant future, for a tough, savvy, and hard-edged look at just what it means to be a "Shaman" in a high-tech electronic society that may be just around the corner.

ALSO IN NOVEMBER: **D. Alexander Smith** makes an impressive *IAsfm* debut with the eloquent, bittersweet, and moving tale of what it feels like to be "Dying in Hull"; **Isaac Asimov** gives us the latest George and Azazel story, "I Love Little Pussy"; **Gregory Feeley** gives us another look at some prehistoric fauna in his droll story of "A Different Drumstick"; and **Victor Milán** makes another impressive *IAsfm* debut with "Brass," a wry and gritty little tale that demonstrates that even in the far future there will still be the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way to do things—sometimes at the cost of your life! Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our November issue on sale on your newsstands on September 20, 1988.

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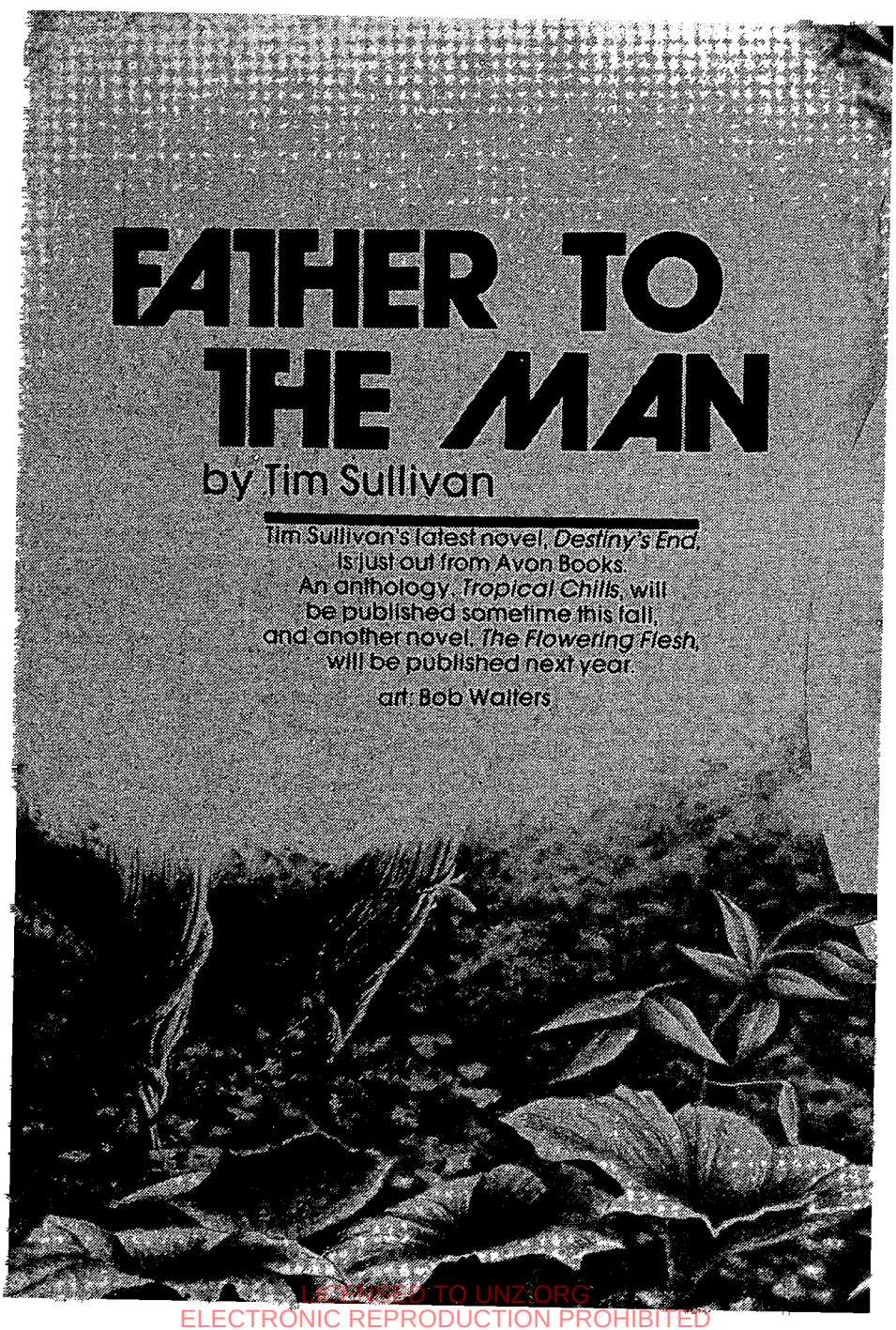
FATHER TO THE MAN

by Tim Sullivan

Tim Sullivan's latest novel, *Destiny's End*, is just out from Avon Books. An anthology, *Tropical Chills*, will be published sometime this fall, and another novel, *The Flowering Flesh*, will be published next year.

art: Bob Walters



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It was dawn by the time the conductor passed through the car, shouting: "Next stop, Philadelphia. Thirtieth Street Station." He paused briefly and glanced at Bobby Nelson's ticket. "You get off here, son."

Bobby wasn't quite awake yet, but as he stretched he saw skyscrapers rising in the early morning mist, like the towers of some fantasy city in a comic book. His bag was on the floor, between his Reeboks, and he sat patiently as the train rolled by a brown river. The other passengers hefted their luggage from overhead racks. The magic vanished, gradually and subtly, as the city was entered. Litter and filth were everywhere, smashed windows glaring down from abandoned buildings like dead eyes.

Soon the train lurched to a stop, and people impatiently lined up in the aisle until the door was opened. Bobby was the last to leave the car. The platform wasn't out in the open like the one in Falstaff, Ohio, where his mother had kissed him goodbye. It was underground, and there were lots of other platforms and dozens of tracks. He followed the crowd through a doorway and rode an escalator up. At the top was an immense statue of an angel carrying a dead soldier. A curly-haired man of about forty stood underneath it, holding a McDonald's coffee cup. As Bobby walked toward him, the man asked in a foreign accent, "Are you Robert Nelson?"

Bobby nodded.

"Come with me." The man sounded grouchy.

Unsure of what to do, Bobby almost ran away. But where would he go? He had no money to go back to Falstaff, he didn't know his way around Philadelphia, and he was only twelve. This wasn't what he'd expected at all.

"Come on," the man said. "Mr. Treffen is waiting."

Bobby felt a little better. At least this guy knew who he was supposed to meet, and he knew Bobby's name, too. It was probably okay.

He followed the man out to the parking lot. The mist was thinning, burned off by the morning sun, but there was still a chill in the air. They walked to an enormous, old, green Cadillac with fins, and the man opened the trunk. Bobby put his bag inside. The man slammed the trunk shut and unlocked the passenger door, and Bobby got in while he went around to the driver's side. They drove in silence through the awakening city streets. Bums sat on steaming grates, women in overcoats and sneakers walked purposefully along already busy streets, black men huddled in small groups on street corners. It was just like on TV.

The Cadillac turned to the left and drove past a traffic circle lined with buildings that looked like Greek temples. Perhaps they were museums or libraries; Bobby was afraid to ask, and the taciturn driver didn't volunteer any information. The man's deeply lined face stared straight ahead at the narrow street.

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They went up a hill past rows of dilapidated brownstones, and ended up parking in front of a three-story brick building with a ground-floor storefront that said "Savings and Loan" over the door. After Bobby got his bag out of the trunk, they went around to the side and the man, still holding his coffee cup, opened an unlocked door in the alley. Inside were stairs, dark but for the dull glow coming from a skylight at the top. The wooden steps creaked noisily as Bobby carried his bag up, and when they reached the landing there was a long corridor off to the right. The man pointed to the single door at the end and said, "There."

He hurried back downstairs and left Bobby alone.

For the second time this morning, Bobby felt like running away. But he didn't. He remembered how his Mom had always called him the man of the family, and he walked to the door.

He knocked.

Bobby didn't hear anyone approaching from the other side, and so he was surprised when the door suddenly swung open. His first impression was of greenery and moistness, like a hothouse. A tall man stood in the shadows beyond the door.

"You are Bobby," the man said. It was a statement, not a question. "I'm Mr. Treffen."

"Pleased to meet you, sir." Bobby couldn't get a very good look at Mr. Treffen's face, it was so dark. He noticed that Mr. Treffen had a weird voice. Not exactly foreign, like the driver's, but weird. He thought he'd heard it before, but he didn't know where or when. When Mr. Treffen had called his Mom a few weeks ago, Bobby hadn't talked to him. "A man drove me here."

"Yes, that was Mr. Wozniak. He does errands for me from time to time. I paid him in advance to pick you up."

"Oh."

"Let me take your bag," Mr. Treffen said, extending a hand.

Bobby gave him his bag. He was glad that he didn't have to shake hands. He wasn't sure what it was that bothered him exactly, besides the voice, but Mr. Treffen struck him as being a little odd. Familiar, too, almost as if this was somebody he'd known a long time ago. Maybe from when he was just a little kid, a baby even, which would explain why he barely remembered the guy.

Mr. Treffen moved to one side and gestured for him to enter. Bobby stepped across the threshold and looked around. The place was really hot, and full of ferns and vines that crawled right up the walls. Flowerpots seemed to be everywhere, on wooden shelves, on tables, on a big captain's desk, hanging from the ceiling; everywhere. Haze hung in the still air.

"Welcome to your new home," said Mr. Treffen, leading him through the potted plants."Let me show you to your room."

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"Thank you," Bobby followed him up rickety stairs, noticing that the ceiling at the top was lopsided. There was another skylight above the landing, with more plants dangling everywhere.

Mr. Treffen led him through a short corridor, which turned at a not-quite right angle. Several more turns, all at odd angles, led them to a door. Opening it, Mr. Treffen gestured for Bobby to enter.

It was cool and dark inside. There were more plants on wooden stands and hanging from ceiling hooks, but not so many as downstairs. A dresser was placed against one wall, and a straight-backed wooden chair against another. Mr. Treffen deposited the bag on a bed that almost blocked access to the window at the back of the long, narrow room, where a noisy air conditioner blew. It was the only comfortable part of the house Bobby had been in yet, even though you could see your breath in the fall air outside.

"There is a bath through there." Mr. Treffen pointed to a door on the opposite wall. "It is for your personal use, and no one else will go in there without your permission. But you must keep it clean."

"Yes, sir," said Bobby.

"After you've bathed, come downstairs for some food."

"Okay."

Without turning, Mr. Treffen solemnly backed out of the room and shut the door behind him. Bobby shrugged and took off his jacket, unzipped his bag and emptied it on the bed. He hung up the jacket along with his good clothes, folded the rest, and put everything in the dresser. Selecting a towel, he opened the other door and walked down a short hallway to a bathroom. His bathroom. He'd never had one all to himself before, not in the cramped apartments he'd shared with his mother. Maybe he was going to like living here, after all.

The shower felt good. He didn't know how he'd gotten dirty, just from sitting on a train all night, but he had. He toweled himself dry, brushed his teeth, and went back to put on some clean clothes. Hair still wet, he left his room and went back the way he'd come with his host.

The strangely angled corridors threw him off somewhere, though, and he ended up at a doorway instead of at the head of the stairs. He was sure he hadn't come this way earlier, but, on the other hand, he didn't see how he could have made a wrong turn. There hadn't been any branching corridors or doorways when they'd first come upstairs. He hadn't *noticed* anything like that, anyway.

Well, what difference did it make if he'd noticed it or not? Here it was, and he had to go back the way he'd come. Next time he'd pay more attention.

He turned around, but then stopped, hearing a funny sound that came from beyond the door. It was a kid's voice, mumbling to itself as if its

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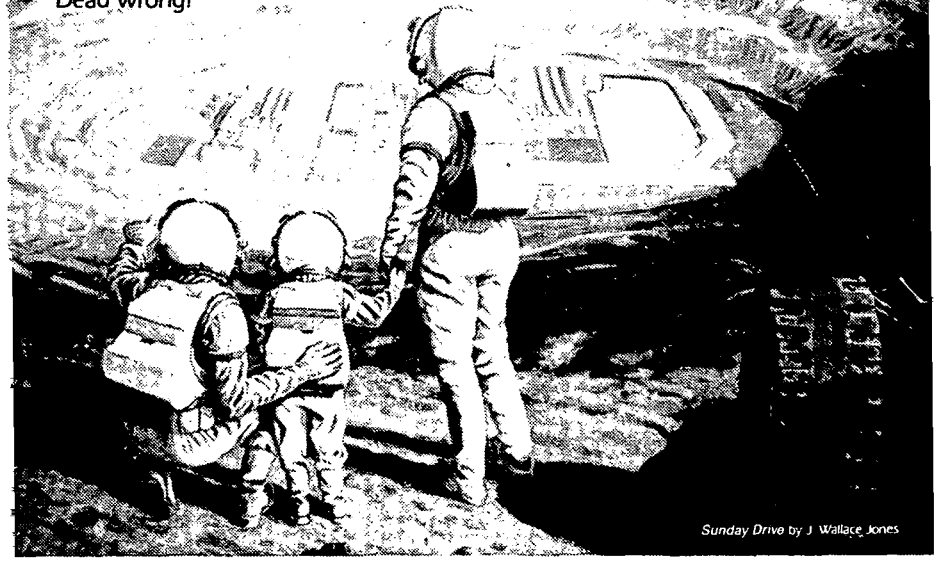

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owner thought nobody was around. It went on a few seconds, and then stopped. Bobby turned back around in the dimly lit corridor, to face the door.

The voice had been replaced by whispering. Was it the same kid? The soft sound was so steady and rhythmic that he began to think it was a machine. A fan or . . . something? Light flashed through the crack at the bottom of the door, and the rhythmic whispering sound continued. Bobby wanted to open that door and see what was on the other side, but he didn't. It wouldn't have been right. Mom had told him to behave in Mr. Treffen's house, and he owed it to her to at least try to be good. Besides, what if he wasn't supposed to see what was in that room?

If he didn't go down to breakfast soon, Mr. Treffen would be wondering where he went. Reluctantly, Bobby turned away from the door, followed by the whispering sound, which diminished as he retraced his steps.

The hallway curved around until he came to an exit. He emerged within sight of the stairs, but not anywhere near where he'd been when he'd gone off track. Well, he would figure it out later.

He went downstairs, to the jungle of a living room. Nobody was sitting in the armchairs, or on the chesterfield sofa, which were almost hidden by the plants. He became confused, uncertain of which way to go. To his right, through some tall ferns, he saw diffuse daylight. There must have been a window over there somewhere. To his left were hundreds of orchids, and a dark hole beyond them.

He heard somebody coming down the stairs. A moment later, Mr. Treffen appeared, gracefully making his way through the foliage.

"In here, Bobby," Mr. Treffen indicated the darkness to Bobby's left. There was a door there, lianas creeping so thickly on the jambs that its dimensions could only be guessed at. Through the door was a dimly lit room, and at its center was a dining table, set with china plates, silver cutlery and cloth napkins. Mr. Treffen approached the table, beckoning for Bobby to come in and sit down.

Bobby took his place at the table, removing the wooden ring from his napkin and arranging it on his lap. Mr. Treffen served him out of a big bowl. The food was dark green glop with bits of brown and yellow in it. Vegetables, though Bobby didn't know what kind. There was bread, too, but no cereal or eggs. Some breakfast.

Mr. Treffen did not join him, but stood by while he ate. This made Bobby nervous, but Mr. Treffen urged him to go ahead and finish his food.

"Can I have a glass of water?" Bobby asked.

"You may, but only after you've finished your breakfast," Mr. Treffen said, smiling. "It's not good for you to wash down your food, because you won't chew properly."

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"Oh." The vegetables were making his throat dry. They had a funny, tart flavor. Not salty, though, and not really bad. Just weird.

"What is this stuff?" Bobby asked. "I mean, I like it, sir, but what's in it?"

"Things that are very good for you," Mr. Treffen said mildly. "Be sure that you eat it all."

Bobby did as he was told, cleaning his plate as quickly as he could. Mr. Treffen then brought him a glass of water, as promised, and Bobby swallowed it all in about three gulps.

Mr. Treffen stayed in the shadows or to one side the whole time, so Bobby never got a good look at him, not really. Bobby's first impression had been of a much older man, but it was hard to tell what his age was. As soon as breakfast was over, Mr. Treffen told him to come into the living room. Bobby sat in an uncomfortable chair, while his host reclined on the chesterfield behind some cycads. The fecund vegtable odor was overwhelming.

"How much did your mother tell you about me, Bobby?" Mr. Treffen asked.

"Not much . . . just that I was going to stay with you from now on."

"Yes, like in a Victorian novel." Bobby couldn't tell if Mr. Treffen was smiling behind all that vegetation or not. "I know that it's been difficult for your mother, but I couldn't send for you before this."

Bobby was surprised. "Before this?" he asked. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that I wanted you with me from the beginning, but circumstances made that impossible."

"Why did you want me with you?" Bobby thought he knew the answer to his own question, and he was afraid of it. Still, he had to learn the truth. "Why couldn't I just stay with Mom?"

"Because you're my flesh and blood, Bobby," Mr. Treffen said.

Bobby sat without moving until his arms and buttocks grew numb. He squirmed a little after awhile, but said nothing. What *could* he say? He had always believed that he didn't have a father.

"I'm sorry. This is doubtless a bit hard for you to understand."

"No, that's okay, sir." This was his father, for crying out loud. His *father*. About a million emotions whirled inside him, and his stomach was doing flip-flops. He wasn't upset, though, just confused. Why hadn't his mother ever told him about this? "I guess I sort of suspected."

"Smart boy." Mr. Treffen leaned forward in his chair, but Bobby still couldn't see him very well. "I couldn't send for you earlier, for reasons that are difficult to explain, but time has grown short. I have to share my life with you now, Bobby."

A drop of sweat trickled down Bobby's right cheek. He felt betrayed

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by his mother, hurt and resentful. She had not trusted him, had kept this all from him. He tried not to be angry, but he couldn't help it.

"Your mother deserves some time for herself. Even though she doesn't have to take care of you anymore, we'll continue to send her money. Added to her waitress pay, it should make her quite comfortable."

"She wanted to get rid of me, didn't she?" It just popped out, a little bubble of rage that he couldn't control.

"Your mother never complained about having to care for you," Mr. Treffen said kindly, "if that's what you mean."

"Maybe she didn't complain, but she didn't like it."

"Can you blame her? She's young. Her desire to enjoy life shouldn't be held against her, Bobby."

Bobby looked down at his Reeboks.

"I know that you're upset about leaving your mother. But you'll soon get used to your new home." Mr. Treffen paused, as if waiting for a reply.

"Yes, sir," was all that Bobby could muster. What choice did he have? He was just a kid, and, hard as it was for him to believe, this weird guy was his father.

"And your new home is an interesting place, Bobby. This building is almost two hundred years old. I completely remodeled the top floors when I moved in, some time ago. I doubt that there's another apartment quite like it anywhere on earth."

"It seems so big," Bobby said, thinking of the wrong turn he'd taken before breakfast.

"My design makes use of space that is usually wasted," Mr. Treffen said. "We'll explore the place later."

"Oh." The idea of finding out what was in that upstairs room took his mind off Mom and off Falstaff, Ohio, at least for the moment.

"Right now, we have your education to consider, Bobby."

It seemed odd to talk about something so ordinary. "Uh, where will I go to school, Mr. Treffen?"

"Right here. With the sorry state of public education, I feel that you'll learn more if I tutor you at home."

Bobby didn't know if he liked this. He wasn't crazy about the idea of staying in all the time, but he really hadn't been looking forward to starting at a new school, either. His friend Sue Hamer had come from Iowa to Falstaff, and she'd had a hard time getting adjusted until Bobby had made friends with her. She'd once told him that it was really hard when you didn't have anybody your own age to talk to, and he was beginning to see just how true that was. But how could he explain it to Mr. Treffen?

"Don't you have to go to work, sir?" he asked. "How can you be my teacher and have a job at the same time?"

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"My work is here, Bobby." Mr. Treffen sat back, watching him through the palm fronds. "People come to me, to avail themselves of my services. And there is a small but steady demand for what I can provide. I'm not rich, but I am able to afford certain luxuries."

Mr. Treffen stood and came closer to Bobby. He definitely seemed younger than when Bobby had first seen him, even younger than at breakfast. He moved away through the orchids and creepers so quickly that Bobby wasn't sure why he knew that.

But he did.

Though he was tired and it was very late, Bobby lay on his bed, wide awake. He wasn't sure how many days he'd been in Philadelphia, but he hadn't been outside once. All he did was study. Today, as usual, he had spent the late morning and afternoon—breaking only for the usual glop at lunch—reading and talking with Mr. Treffen, mostly about biology, which Bobby wouldn't have studied until high school if he had stayed in Falstaff. It was interesting, all about genes and chromosomes and DNA. He'd read some stuff about it on his own, but it was nothing compared to what Mr. Treffen knew.

A young black woman had showed up that afternoon, and Mr. Treffen had left Bobby to go upstairs with her. Bobby wondered if they had gone through *that* door, and what they were doing for such a long time with the kid who was up there. If the kid *was* still up there. Bobby hadn't been able to find the door since that morning. He almost wondered if it really existed. All he knew for sure was that the woman didn't come back down, not when Mr. Treffen did, anyhow.

When Mr. Treffen joined him on the chesterfield, they resumed the lesson as if nothing had happened. Mr. Treffen never mentioned the woman. He just continued on about autogamy, isochronism, cellular coevality, and other words that were almost as hard to pronouce as to understand. Finally, Bobby started to drift off, staring at the weird creepers and flowers without really seeing them, while daydreaming of home.

"I suppose you can only absorb so much at one sitting," Mr. Treffen said. "'Your eyes are . . . glazing over, as they say."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't be." Mr. Treffen stood, stretching out his hand to a tree whose roots sank into a tub of murky water. "This is a banyan tree," he said, "very young yet. Soon it will grow too large for this place, and it will have to be moved to a more appropriate environment. Parting with it will pain me, but it must be done. Do you understand why, Bobby?"

"Yes, sir."

"People are like that, too."

Bobby waited for him to make a speech, like a teacher back home. But

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Mr. Treffen said nothing more. He just smiled, and told Bobby that they were through with today's lessons.

It was a funny thing, but when Bobby stood to go upstairs, he thought that Mr. Treffen looked shorter than before, his clothes hanging loosely on his angular frame. The first time Bobby had seen him, Mr. Treffen had seemed really tall, but maybe it was just because Bobby had been stooped over, carrying his bag. Mr. Treffen wasn't really that much bigger than Bobby, when you got right down to it, and Bobby was only average height for his age. But Mr. Treffen sure knew a lot. In fact, Bobby wasn't sure that he could keep up with these science lessons.

The bedroom was silent, but for the air conditioner. A faint, peach-colored, streetlamp radiance came in through the window behind the bed, casting leafy shadows on the walls. The idea of exploring emerged from the back of his mind, rising until it floated on the surface like a water lily. It seemed like a bad thing to do, in a way, but he really wanted to. Just creep around in the middle of the night while Mr. Treffen was asleep. Maybe he could even find out what was on the other side of that door.

Almost without realizing what he was doing, he got up and went out into the hallway. It should be easy to find the stairway even at night, since the skylight over the landing would show in the dark. Once he got his bearings, maybe he could figure out where the door was. He could hardly see anything, though, just enough to make his way down the hall. Unidentifiable plants hung like spiders, and he bumped into one along the way. It swung wildly for a moment, until he caught and steadied it.

Turning a corner, Bobby thought he saw a dim light suffusing the murk ahead of him. But he came to another angle, and then another. He still didn't see the skylight. The glow stayed ahead of him, growing brighter at each turn. At last he saw that it came from the floor, not from the ceiling. It was a bar of brightness, originating from beneath the same door he had stumbled upon that first morning. It was as if Bobby had been drawn straight to this spot. Why hadn't he been able to find it in the past few days, though?

As he approached the door, the whispering sound became faintly audible.

Bobby wanted to open that door very badly. Did he dare, though? What would he tell Mr. Treffen if he was found inside that room? That he had been looking for the bathroom? No, he would have to tell the truth.

Mr. Treffen had never forbidden him to go in there, though. In fact, he hadn't forbidden him to go anywhere in the house. It was just that it didn't seem polite to go snooping around somebody's place like this. But he'd been told that this was his home now, so maybe he *did* have the right. Bobby stood in the shadowy corridor, undecided, the glare from

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the hardwood floor reflecting upward upon him. It seemed that he remained there for a very long time. Minutes. Hours.

Then he heard a cry from behind the door.

Bobby's heart grew huge, thumping in his chest. As the cry was repeated, he understood that it was not the sound of somebody who was going to rush out and catch him, but of somebody in pain. He knew that he would have to go in now, but he still hesitated.

Another cry, and then another, came from behind that door. Was it the woman he had seen this afternoon? The kid he'd heard a few days ago? It almost sounded like two people, but he couldn't be sure.

The cries followed one after another now, faster and faster. Then there was no time between them at all, as they rose in pitch and volume into a scream.

Bobby couldn't stand it any longer. With trembling fingers, he grabbed the doorknob and twisted.

The door opened inward, and Bobby stood at the threshold, uncertain of what he was seeing. The air swirled with an oily vapor, and at the bare room's center was a bubble of light that contained something that sweated and writhed. It couldn't have been human, but it was. Fingers clenched and unclenched at the ends of four arms. Two pairs of legs shuddered, muscles quivering under gleaming, dark skin. A shapeless, naked torso sprouted twin necks that did not quite support two lolling, shrieking heads.

Bobby was scared. He didn't know whether he should try to help, or run. But what could he do? He was just a kid, and he didn't even know what he was seeing. It couldn't have been what he thought, but whatever it was, it wasn't right. Still, these . . . people were in pain, and he should try to do *something*.

Maybe Mr. Treffen could help. Bobby almost called out, but caught himself. Mr. Treffen must have been responsible for what was happening here . . . whatever it was. As he stared at the squirming limbs, Bobby remembered stories on the news about a crazy guy who locked women up and cut them into pieces. But this wasn't like that. No, this was something he'd never even dreamed about, much less seen on TV. These girls—at least they looked like two black girls—were distorted, but they weren't mutilated. It was as if they were somehow *stuck together* into one body. But that was impossible.

"Bobby." The voice came from above.

Bobby looked up, unable to run, though he wanted to very badly. A stem of brilliant light rose from the bubble, past a catwalk that cut across the space under the ceiling. He was transfixed as a dark figure moved easily on the catwalk. It was Mr. Treffen. He quietly descended a ladder

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and walked across the room towards Bobby, while the creature, or creatures, in the light sobbed pitifully.

"I—I'm sorry," Bobby stammered. "I heard someone cry out, and I—"

"It's all right, Bobby, you would have found out soon, anyway."

As Mr. Treffen came closer, Bobby saw that suspenders held up pants several sizes too large for him and that his shirt billowed over his spare frame like a parachute. He was much smaller, and younger. The light from the bubble shone on his unlined face as he spoke.

"I wanted to prepare you, as much as possible, for what is going to happen," Mr. Treffen said.

"I don't understand, sir." Bobby didn't like this one bit. "What are you talking about?"

Mr. Treffen drew closer. He was *so* young, Bobby thought. Not much more than a kid.

"It's difficult to explain," Mr. Treffen said. "I owe it to you to try, however."

The creatures wailed behind him.

"Do you remember what we talked about this afternoon, Bobby? Autogamy, isochronism, and cellular coevality? If I'd told you then that there are some people on earth who have a different method of procreation, of reproduction, you wouldn't have believed me. But that's what you're seeing here. They're creating something beautiful."

Bobby stared straight at Mr. Treffen, but still didn't seem to be able to see him clearly. "But it—they—are in pain."

"Birth is always painful, Bobby."

"Birth?" Bobby shook his head, blurting out, "Are you crazy?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

"But those things can't give birth! . . . Can they?"

Mr. Treffen nodded. "Come with me. I want to show you something." He glanced fondly at the light bubble and then turned.

Transfixed, Bobby went to the ladder with him, walking gingerly past the screaming thing. Mr. Treffen gestured for him to climb up to the catwalk. Bobby reluctantly did so, feeling it shake as Mr. Treffen came up behind him. Bobby regretted that he hadn't run away the minute he had heard the screaming. He just hadn't been able to leave. And now it was too late to escape. Mr. Treffen was between him and freedom.

Mr. Treffen joined him on the catwalk, which bounced slightly whenever they moved. Strung ropes served as handholds, which Bobby gripped tightly.

"Look up, Bobby," Mr. Treffen said.

Bobby did as he was told. Through the darkness above him, the stem of light traveled downward from some sort of projector set in the ceiling.

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On either side of the projector was a snaking duct that ran up the walls from the floors below. The rhythmic whispering noise was louder here.

"What is it?" Bobby asked.

"Pure oxygen is collected and piped in, and then purified further by this light. It's a simple device, actually."

"Does it do. . . ." Bobby pointed down at the writhing creatures below. ". . . that?"

"No, this machine is only an aid, a kind of incubator. All of the materials for it are fairly easy to acquire. It's simply a matter of using them correctly. What you're seeing is a natural birth."

"Natural? Then it isn't human?"

Mr. Treffen looked at him thoughtfully. It seemed that he couldn't have been more than a year or two older than Bobby, and hardly any taller. He had become much younger. But at least he was *human.*

"I wouldn't say that. They were conceived in human wombs, the same as you and me."

"You say 'they,' but there's only one of them!"

"Do you remember the definition of autogamy?" Mr. Treffen asked, his voice cracking like a boy just reaching puberty. "It's when the nucleus of a cell divides into two parts and reunites."

"But we were talking about cells," Bobby said, his whole body shaking now, terrified of what he was about to hear. "Those are *whole* people down there."

"Yes, they're made up of cells. We're a very adaptable species."

Species. For some reason, cartoon shows like "Voltron" and "Masters of the Universe" popped into Bobby's delirious mind. "You're an alien," he said.

"Well, sort of." The thing below them gurgled its agony. "The process is almost finished now, so why don't we go outside, and give the neonate a little time to herself?"

Bobby could not resist following Mr. Treffen. They made their way along the catwalk until they came to a platform. At the end of the platform was a door, with several locks and a deadbolt. Mr. Treffen shot the bolts and opened the door onto a chilly star-filled night. Stepping out onto a flat, gravel-covered roof, they turned to inspect the glittering towers of Philadelphia.

"That's city hall over there," Mr. Treffen said, steam rising from his mouth. "The one with the statue on top."

"I don't care about that," Bobby said, gesticulating at the stars. "I want to know where you come from."

"I don't know." Mr. Treffen stated this matter-of-factly.

"You don't know? How can you not know?"

"Well, our ancestors came here a long time ago. We don't remember

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exactly when or why. But they were stranded, and they couldn't survive here the way they were, so they made some biological alterations. They died, but not before impregnating a human woman with the modified genes. We are the result."

"You've been living right here, and nobody ever noticed?"

"We're scattered all over the earth, Bobby," Mr. Treffen said in a childish, piping voice. "There aren't very many of us, because of the special arrangements that have to be made for childbirth. But we do maintain a more or less constant population."

Bobby heard Bruce Springsteen singing from a boom-box on the street below. The tinny sound gradually faded as he tried to take in everything he had heard. He would have thought Mr. Treffen was nuts, if it weren't for what he'd seen with his own eyes. Bobby was afraid of Mr. Treffen, and yet he wanted to be with him, too. It was as if he were being held here by some force that he felt but couldn't see. As if he were somehow part of this crazy thing. And then he was struck by the implication of what Mr. Treffen had said.

"When you say 'we'," he said slowly, "you're including me, aren't you?"

"Well, of course, Bobby. I told you that you're my flesh and blood."

Bobby thought he was going to be sick. He was dizzy, and could hardly stand up straight. It couldn't be true. He was no different from any kid he'd gone to school with. Maybe he'd spent more time reading than most, but that didn't mean he wasn't human. "You've got the wrong guy," he said weakly.

"No, I'm afraid you're mistaken." Mr. Treffen turned and looked Bobby straight in the eye, his face illuminated by the moon. "Look at me."

Bobby could not turn his gaze away, could not deny what he had known down deep ever since he entered this room, could not convince himself any longer that he didn't see Mr. Treffen's face. He really *looked* at Mr. Treffen for the first time. He saw himself. Perhaps a year older, but there was no question that it was Bobby Nelson looking back at him.

"No!" He pulled away, running across the roof, kicking up gravel until he stopped at the very edge. "I'll kill myself!"

Mr. Treffen made no move to stop him. "I know this is a shock, Bobby," he said. "But it's not as bad as you think."

"You used my mother!" Tears were streaming down Bobby's face. No wonder she didn't want him. "You used her!"

"No, I didn't. I love your mother, and she loves me. She was quite willing to have my child."

"Your child! I'm not your child, you fucking freak!" Bobby broke down and sobbed, falling to his knees with his face in his hands. "Go away and leave me alone."

"All right, Bobby."

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He heard Mr. Treffen walking in the gravel, followed by the echo of footsteps on the catwalk. And then he was alone, except for occasional voices drifting up from the street and a distant train whistle. He wanted to go home, back to Falstaff. But how could he ever face his mother again, and not remember what had happened here? And could he go back, even if he wanted to? The more he fought this thing, the sicker he felt. He sat down, his back to the door, alone in his misery for what seemed a very, very long time.

Until something touched his shoulder lightly.

He looked up to see a pretty black girl, about his age, just starting to mature into a woman. She wore a blue robe, and was staring at him with concern. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Are you . . . ?" Bobby didn't know quite how to ask her what was on his mind. She looked just like a normal person. "Are *you* all right?" he said.

"Yes." She smiled at him. "I'm fine."

"But where's your other . . . parts?"

The smile grew bigger. "We use what's left over to feed the plants."

Bobby didn't know if she was kidding or not. Nothing would have surprised him anymore, though. "You're both in there?" he asked. "Inside you, I mean?"

"Yes."

"And you have both memories?"

"That's right."

"You must know an awful lot."

"More than either of us would have thought possible before tonight."

He wondered exactly what she meant by that. "But do you know what you are now? Are you human?"

"Don't you think I'm human?"

"I don't know."

"Well, let's say that my father was human, and he conceived me in my own womb."

"So you're your own mother."

"That's right, but my younger self is dominant."

"But you remember *everything* that happened to both of you?"

"Yes."

Too fascinated to be afraid, or even sick anymore, Bobby wiped his tears with the back of his hand. "I don't understand."

"Our separated selves were isochronic. They traveled in different directions before we were joined for the next life phase. We call it conflation."

"Conflation. . . ."

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"Yeah." The girl smiled, and she was beautiful, just as Mr. Treffen had predicted. "My name's Florinda." She stuck out her hand.

Bobby hesitated for a moment. What he had seen a few minutes ago made him wonder if he should touch her. But she was just a girl, after all, like Sue Hamer back home in Ohio. He took her hand, feeling its warmth as she squeezed his limp fingers. "I'm Bobby. Bobby Nelson."

"It's cold out here," said Florinda. "Why don't we go back inside?"

"I don't know." But now that she had mentioned it, he realized that he had been shivering in his shirt sleeves for some time.

"Oh, come on. You can't stay on the roof all night."

"No, I guess not." Bobby stood up, hearing a police siren in the distance. "But I don't want to go back in there, either."

"Well, you're not being held against your will, you know," Florinda said, taking his arm and gently guiding him inside. She closed the door behind them.

"Might as well be," Bobby replied. "I'm in a strange place, and I don't have any money."

"Mr. Treffen will give you some, if you ask him. He'll get Mr. Wozniak to drive you to the station, and you can leave whenever you want."

Bobby stopped at the edge of the platform, where the catwalk began. "Really?"

"Sure, he's not running a jail here."

Bobby looked closely at her and saw no evidence of deceit in her face. He believed her, but he wondered if he would be able to leave, even if he tried. It would not be easy to resist the urge to remain in this room. But as he turned and started down the catwalk toward the ladder, he resolved to find the strength to manage it.

Mr. Treffen stood below, the light bubble casting his shadow across the hardwood floor. Bobby intended to climb right down there and tell him that he was going to split, even if it made him puke to say it.

"One thing you ought to know, though, before you tell him you're leaving," Florinda said.

"Shit!" Bobby stopped, the brilliant stem in front of him. There was a catch. He didn't want to hear it, but he could tell that she would say it anyway, even if he asked her not to. He was not going to get away. It was all in her tone.

He turned to face her once again. "What is it?"

"He'll die if you don't go through with it."

"I don't care! Let him!" But he wasn't sure that he meant that. Not if Mr. Treffen was really part of him. "Maybe I'll be free when he's dead."

Florinda held him in her gaze. She said softly, "You'll die, too."

"Die?" He studied her compassionate brown eyes, hoping to see the lie there. But she looked straight back at him, transfixing him with the

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gravity of what she had said. "I'm not even thirteen yet," he said. "How can I die?"

"Conflation is essential for the survival of the organism," she replied. "You're almost at the point where your discrete selves can no longer survive autonomously."

He knew in his gut that it was true. Mr. Treffen was changing, becoming like him. Cellular coevality. Isochronism. Shrinking, becoming younger, his body adapting for the painful process Florinda called conflation. But why Bobby? Why did *he* have to suffer, too? Hot tears came to his eyes, tears of frustration and despair and hatred.

"It isn't fair!" he shouted. At the sound of his voice, Mr. Treffen looked up, a small and lonely figure waiting to learn if he would live or die.

"No, it isn't fair," Florinda agreed. "You're right."

Enraged, Bobby screamed at her. "Bitch!" he called her. "Stupid fucking bitch!"

Jewels gleamed in her eyes, the light stem reflected in her tears. "I'm sorry, Bobby," she said, "but it's the only way."

Bobby told himself that he didn't believe it. He trembled, but he wondered if it was anger that made him shake, or his biological urges. He clutched the ropes so tightly that his nails dug into his palms. Sweat dripped from his face, spattering the wood of the catwalk. It wasn't just the heat. Even as he fought against it, he was drawn to join his other self. He wanted to believe that he was dreaming, having a nightmare . . . but he knew that he wasn't. This was real, and he wasn't going to get out of it. This was what he'd been created for. Florinda was only trying to help him. He felt ashamed of what he had just said to her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right."

"It wouldn't be so hard," said Bobby, "if I'd known all along."

"That's what my younger self thought," said Florinda. "But now I feel okay. Even better than okay. In a few hours, so will you."

Bobby bowed his head, praying that she was right. If he could believe what she was saying, maybe he could get through it. For some reason he trusted her. Maybe it was because he had been present at her birth, had watched her struggle for life, and was certain that she could not lie to him, not about this. He turned, moving along the catwalk until he came to the ladder. As he began to climb down, he caught one last glimpse of Florinda smiling at him. He hesitated when he got off the ladder, turning slowly toward the light. This was it, then. Bobby sighed, his fears fading as he crossed the floor. In a moment he stood before his mirror image, becalmed. His own hand was extended to help him, and he found it warm and human.

He went willingly to be born. ●

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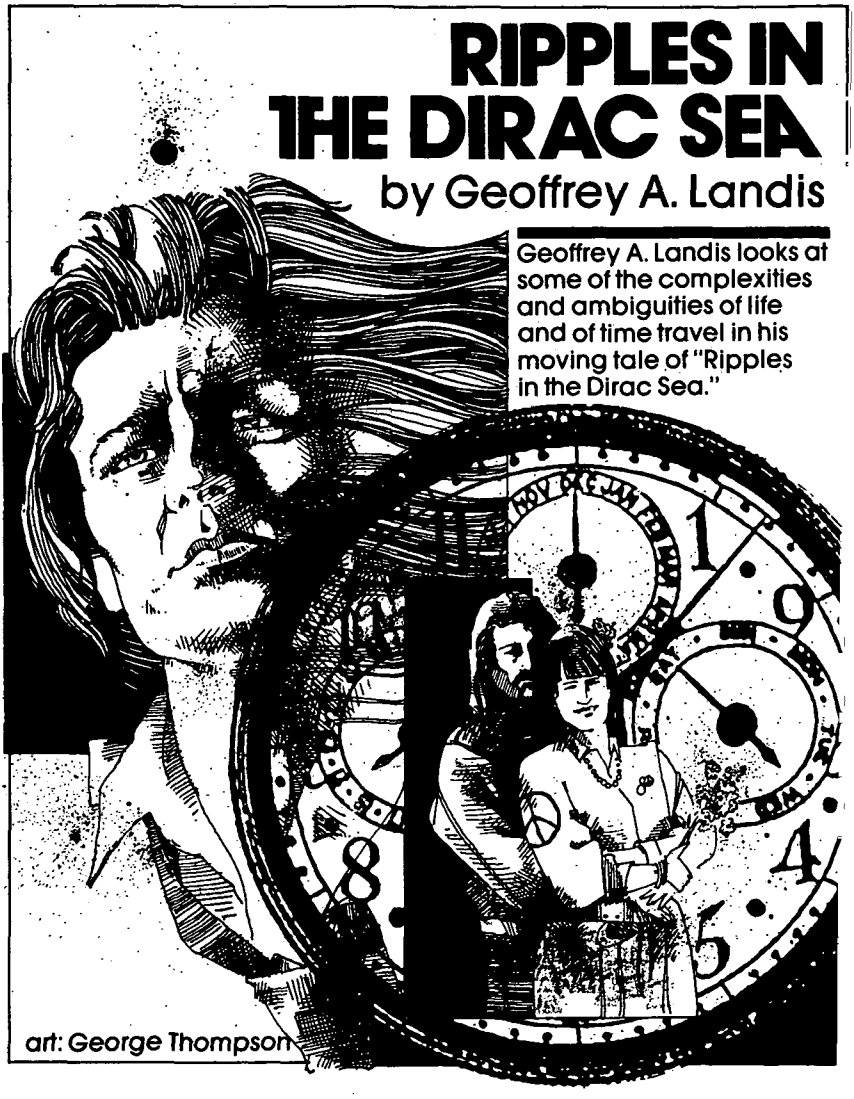
RIPPLES IN THE DIRAC SEA

by Geoffrey A. Landis

Geoffrey A. Landis looks at some of the complexities and ambiguities of life and of time travel in his moving tale of "Ripples in the Dirac Sea."



art: George Thompson

My death looms over me like a tidal wave, rushing toward me with an inexorable slow-motion majesty. And yet I flee, pointless though it may be.

I depart, and my ripples diverge to infinity, like waves smoothing out the footprints of forgotten travelers.

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* * *

We were so careful to avoid any paradox, the day we first tested my machine. We pasted a duct-tape cross onto the concrete floor of a windowless lab, placed an alarm clock on the mark, and locked the door. An hour later we came back, removed the clock, and put the experimental machine in the room with a super-eight camera set in the coils. I aimed the camera at the X, and one of my grad students programmed the machine to send the camera back half an hour, stay in the past five minutes, then return. It left and returned without even a flicker. When we developed the film, the time on the clock was half an hour before we loaded the camera. We'd succeeded in opening the door into the past. We celebrated with coffee and champagne.

Now that I know a lot more about time, I understand our mistake, that we had not thought to put a movie camera in the room with the clock to photograph the machine as it arrived from the future. But what is obvious to me now was not obvious then.

I arrive, and the ripples converge to the instant *now* from the vastness of the infinite sea.

To San Francisco, June 8, 1965. A warm breeze riffles across dandelion-speckled grass, while puffy white clouds form strange and wondrous shapes for our entertainment. Yet so very few people pause to enjoy it. They scurry about, diligently preoccupied, believing that if they act busy enough, they must be important. "They hurry so," I say. "Why can't they slow down, sit back, enjoy the day?"

"They're trapped in the illusion of time," says Dancer. He lies on his back and blows a soap bubble, his hair flopping back long and brown in a time when "long" hair meant anything below the ear. A puff of breeze takes the bubble down the hill and into the stream of pedestrians. They uniformly ignore it. "They're caught in the belief that what they do is important to some future goal." The bubble pops against a briefcase, and Dancer blows another. "You and I, we know how false an illusion that is. There is no past, no future, only the now, eternal."

He was right, more right than he could have possibly imagined. Once I, too, was preoccupied and self-important. Once I was brilliant and ambitious. I was twenty-eight years old, and I'd made the greatest discovery in the world.

From my hiding place I watched him come up the service elevator. He was thin almost to the point of starvation, a nervous man with stringy blonde hair and an armless white T-shirt. He looked up and down the hall, but failed to see me hidden in the janitor's closet. Under each arm was a two-gallon can of gasoline, in each hand another. He put down

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three of the cans and turned the last one upside down, then walked down the hall, spreading a pungent trail of gasoline. His face was blank. When he started on the second can, I figured it was about enough. As he passed my hiding spot, I walloped him over the head with a wrench, and called hotel security. Then I went back to the closet and let the ripples of time converge.

I arrived in a burning room, flames licking forth at me, the heat almost too much to bear. I gasped for breath—a mistake—and punched at the keypad.

NOTES ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TIME TRAVEL:

1) Travel is possible only into the past.
2) The object transported will return to exactly the time and place of departure.
3) It is not possible to bring objects from the past to the present.
4) Actions in the past cannot change the present.

One time I tried jumping back a hundred million years, to the Cretaceous, to see dinosaurs. All the picture books show the landscape as being covered with dinosaurs. I spent three days wandering around a swamp—in my new tweed suit—before catching even a glimpse of any dinosaur larger than a basset hound. That one—a theropod of some sort, I don't know which—skittered away as soon as it caught a whiff of me. Quite a disappointment.

My professor in transfinite math used to tell stories about a hotel with an infinite number of rooms. One day all the rooms are full, and another guest arrives. "No problem," says the desk clerk. He moves the person in room one into room two, the person in room two into room three, and so on. Presto! A vacant room.

A little later, an infinite number of guests arrive. "No problem," says the dauntless desk clerk. He moves the person in room one into room two, the person in room two into room four, the person in room three into room six, and so on. Presto! An infinite number of rooms vacant.

My time machine works on just that principle.

Again I return to 1965, the fixed point, the strange attractor to my chaotic trajectory. In years of wandering I've met countless people, but Daniel Ranien—Dancer—was the only one who truly had his head together. He had a soft, easy smile, a battered secondhand guitar, and as much wisdom as it has taken me a hundred lifetimes to learn. I've known him in good times and bad, in summer days with blue skies that we swore would last a thousand years, in days of winter blizzards with

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drifted snow piled high over our heads. In happier times we have laid roses into the barrels of rifles, we laid our bodies across the city streets in the midst of riots, and not been hurt. And I have been with him when he died, once, twice, a hundred times over.

He died on February 8, 1969, a month into the reign of King Richard the Trickster and his court fool Spiro, a year before Kent State and Altamont and the secret war in Cambodia slowly strangled the summer of dreams. He died, and there was—is—nothing I can do. The last time he died I dragged him to a hospital, where I screamed and ranted until finally I convinced them to admit him for observation, though nothing seemed wrong with him. With X-rays and arteriograms and radioactive tracers, they found the incipient bubble in his brain; they drugged him, shaved his beautiful long brown hair, and operated on him, cutting out the offending capillary and tying it off neatly. When the anesthetic wore off, I sat in the hospital room and held his hand. There were big purple blotches under his eyes. He gripped my hand and stared, silent, into space. Visiting hours or no, I didn't let them throw me out of the room. He just stared. In the grey hours just before dawn he sighed softly and died. There was nothing at all that I could do.

Time travel is subject to two constraints: conservation of energy, and causality. The energy to appear in the past is only borrowed from the Dirac sea, and since ripples in the Dirac sea propagate in the negative t direction, transport is only into the past. Energy is conserved in the present as long as the object transported returns with zero time delay, and the principle of causality assures that actions in the past cannot change the present. For example, what if you went in the past and killed your father? Who, then, would invent the time machine?

Once I tried to commit suicide by murdering my father, before he met my mother, twenty three years before I was born. It changed nothing, of course, and even when I did it I knew it would change nothing. But you have to try these things. How else could I know for sure?

Next we tried sending a rat back. It made the trip through the Dirac sea and back undamaged. Then we tried a trained rat, one we borrowed from the psychology lab across the green without telling them what we wanted it for. Before its little trip it had been taught to run through a maze to get a piece of bacon. Afterwards, it ran the maze as fast as ever.

We still had to try it on a human. I volunteered myself and didn't allow anyone to talk me out of it. By trying it on myself, I dodged the University regulations about experimenting on humans.

The dive into the negative energy sea felt like nothing at all. One moment I stood in the center of the loop of Renselz coils, watched by my

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two grad students and a technician; the next I was alone, and the clock had jumped back exactly one hour. Alone in a locked room with nothing but a camera and a clock, that moment was the high point of my life.

The moment when I first met Dancer was the low point. I was in Berkeley, a bar called "Trishia's," slowly getting trashed. I'd been doing that a lot, caught between omnipotence and despair. It was 1967. 'Frisco then—it was the middle of the hippie era—seemed somehow appropriate.

There was a girl, sitting at a table with a group from the university. I walked over to her table and invited myself to sit down. I told her she didn't exist, that her whole world didn't exist, it was all created by the fact that I was watching, and would disappear back into the sea of unreality as soon as I stopped looking. Her name was Lisa, and she argued back. Her friends, bored, wandered off, and in a while Lisa realized just how drunk I was. She dropped a bill on the table and walked out into the foggy night.

I followed her out. When she saw me following, she clutched her purse and bolted.

He was suddenly there under the streetlight. For a second I thought he was a girl. He had bright blue eyes and straight brown hair down to his shoulders. He wore an embroidered Indian shirt, with a silver and turquoise medallion around his neck and a guitar slung across his back. He was lean, almost stringy, and moved like a dancer or a karate master. But it didn't occur to me to be afraid of him.

He looked me over. "That won't solve your problem, you know," he said.

And instantly I was ashamed. I was no longer sure exactly what I'd had in mind or why I'd followed her. It had been years since I'd first fled my death, and I had come to think of others as unreal, since nothing I could do would permanently affect them. My head was spinning. I slid down the wall and sat down, hard, on the sidewalk. What had I come to?

He helped me back into the bar, fed me orange juice and pretzels, and got me to talk. I told him everything. Why not, since I could unsay anything I said, undo anything I did? But I had no urge to. He listened to it all, saying nothing. No one else had ever listened to the whole story before. I can't explain the effect it had on me. For uncountable years I'd been alone, and then, if only for a moment . . . it hit me with the intensity of a tab of acid. If only for a moment, I was not alone.

We left arm in arm. Half a block away, Dancer stopped, in front of an alley. It was dark.

"Something not quite right here." His voice had a puzzled tone.

I pulled him back. "Hold on. You don't want to go down there—" He pulled free and walked in. After a slight hesitation, I followed.

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The alley smelled of old beer, mixed with garbage and stale vomit. In a moment, my eyes became adjusted to the dark.

Lisa was cringing in a corner behind some trash cans. Her clothes had been cut away with a knife, and lay scattered around. Blood showed dark on her thighs and one arm. She didn't seem to see us. Dancer squatted down next to her and said something soft. She didn't respond. He pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around her, then cradled her in his arms and picked her up. "Help me get her to my apartment."

"Apartment, hell. We'd better call the police," I said.

"Call the pigs? Are you crazy? You want them to rape her, too?"

I'd forgotten; this was the sixties. Between the two of us, we got her to Dancer's VW bug and took her to his apartment in The Hashbury. He explained it to me quietly as we drove, a dark side of the summer of love that I'd not seen before. It was greasers, he said. They come down to Berkeley because they heard that hippie chicks gave it away free, and get nasty when they met one who thought otherwise.

Her wounds were mostly superficial. Dancer cleaned her, put her in bed, and stayed up all night beside her, talking and crooning and making little reassuring noises. I slept on one of the mattresses in the hall. When I woke up in the morning, they were both in his bed. She was sleeping quietly. Dancer was awake, holding her. I was aware enough to realize that that was all he was doing, holding her, but still I felt a sharp pang of jealousy, and didn't know which one of them it was that I was jealous of.

NOTES FOR A LECTURE ON TIME TRAVEL

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of intellectual giants, whose likes will perhaps never again be equaled. Einstein had just invented relativity, Heisenberg and Schrodinger quantum mechanics, but nobody yet knew how to make the two theories consistent with each other. In 1930, a new person tackled the problem. His name was Paul Dirac. He was twenty-eight years old. He succeeded where the others had failed.

His theory was an unprecedented success, except for one small detail. According to Dirac's theory, a particle could have either positive or negative energy. What did this mean, a particle of negative energy? How could something have negative energy? And why don't ordinary—positive energy—particles fall down into these negative energy states, releasing a lot of free energy in the process?

You or I might have merely stipulated that it was impossible for an ordinary positive energy particle to make a transition to negative energy. But Dirac was not an ordinary man. He was a genius, the greatest physicist of all, and he had an answer. If every possible nevative energy

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state was already occupied, a particle couldn't drop into a negative energy state. Ah ha! So Dirac postulated that the entire universe is entirely filled with negative energy particles. They surround us, permeate us, in the vacuum of outer space and in the center of the earth, every possible place a particle could be. An infinitely dense "sea" of negative energy particles. The Dirac sea.

His argument had holes in it, but that comes later.

Once I went to visit the crucifixion. I took a jet from Santa Cruz to Tel Aviv, and a bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. On a hill outside the city, I dove through the Dirac sea.

I arrived in my three-piece suit. No way to help that, unless I wanted to travel naked. The land was surprisingly green and fertile, more so than I'd expected. The hill was now a farm, covered with grape arbors and olive trees. I hid the coils behind some rocks and walked down to the road. I didn't get far. Five minutes on the road, I ran into a group of people. They had dark hair, dark skin, and wore clean white tunics. Romans? Jews? Egyptians? How could I tell? They spoke to me, but I couldn't understand a word. After a while two of them held me, while a third searched me. Were they robbers, searching for money? Romans, searching for some kind of identity papers? I realized how naïve I'd been to think I could just find appropriate dress and somehow blend in with the crowds. Finding nothing, the one who'd done the search carefully and methodically beat me up. At last he pushed me face down in the dirt. While the other two held me down, he pulled out a dagger and slashed through the tendons on the back of each leg. They were merciful, I guess. They left me with my life. Laughing and talking incomprehensibly among themselves, they walked away.

My legs were useless. One of my arms was broken. It took me four hours to crawl back up the hill, dragging myself with my good arm. Occasionally people would pass by on the road, studiously ignoring me. Once I reached the hiding place, pulling out the Renselz coils and wrapping them around me was pure agony. By the time I entered return on the keypad I was wavering in and out of consciousness. I finally managed to get it entered. From the Dirac sea the ripples converged

and I was in my hotel room in Santa Cruz. The ceiling had started to fall in where the girders had burned through. Fire alarms shrieked and wailed, but there was no place to run. The room was filled with a dense, acrid smoke. Trying not to breathe, I punched out a code on the keypad, somewhen, anywhen other than that one instant

and I was in the hotel room, five days before. I gasped for breath. The woman in the hotel bed shrieked and tried to pull the covers up. The man screwing her was too busy to pay any mind. They weren't real

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anyway. I ignored them and paid a little more attention to where to go next. Back to '65, I figured. I punched in the combo

and was standing in an empty room on the thirtieth floor of a hotel just under construction. A full moon gleamed on the silhouettes of silent construction cranes. I flexed my legs experimentally. Already the memory of the pain was beginning to fade. That was reasonable, because it had never happened. Time travel. It's not immortality, but it's got to be the next best thing.

You can't change the past, no matter how you try.

In the morning I explored Dancer's pad. It was crazy, a small third floor apartment a block off Haight Ashbury that had been converted into something from another planet. The floor of the apartment had been completely covered with old mattresses, on top of which was a jumbled confusion of quilts, pillows, Indian blankets, stuffed animals. You took off your shoes before coming in—Dancer always wore sandals, leather ones from Mexico with soles cut from old tires. The radiators, which didn't work anyway, were spray painted in dayglo colors. The walls were plastered with posters: Peter Max prints, brightly colored Eschers, poems by Allen Ginsberg, record album covers, peace rally posters, a "Haight is Love" sign, FBI ten-most-wanted posters torn down from a post office with the photos of famous antiwar activists circled in magic marker, a huge peace symbol in passion-pink. Some of the posters were illuminated with black light and luminesced in impossible colors. The air was musty with incense and the banana-sweet smell of dope. In one corner a record player played "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" on infinite repeat. Whenever one copy of the album got too scratchy, inevitably one of Dancer's friends would bring in another.

He never locked the door. "Somebody wants to rip me off, well, hey, they probably need it more than I do anyway, okay? It's cool." People dropped by any time of day or night.

I let my hair grow long. Dancer and Lisa and I spent that summer together, laughing, playing guitar, making love, writing silly poems and sillier songs, experimenting with drugs. That was when LSD was blooming onto the scene like sunflowers, when people were still unafraid of the strange and beautiful world on the other side of reality. That was a time to live. I knew that it was Dancer that Lisa truly loved, not me, but in those days free love was in the air like the scent of poppies, and it didn't matter. Not much, anyway.

NOTES FOR A LECTURE ON TIME TRAVEL (continued)

Having postulated that all of space was filled with an infinitely dense sea of negative energy particles, Dirac went on further and asked if we,

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in the positive-energy universe, could interact with this negative energy sea. What would happen, say, if you added enough energy to an electron to take it out of the negative energy sea? Two things: first, you would create an electron, seemingly out of nowhere. Second, you would leave behind a "hole" in the sea. The hole, Dirac realized, would act as if it were a particle itself, a particle exactly like an electron except for one thing: it would have the opposite charge. But if the hole ever encountered an electron, the electron would fall back into the Dirac sea, annihilating both electron and hole in a bright burst of energy. Eventually they gave the hole in the Dirac sea a name of its own: "positron." When Anderson discovered the positron two years later to vindicate Dirac's theory, it was almost an anticlimax.

And over the next fifty years, the reality of the Dirac sea was almost ignored by physicists. Antimatter, the holes in the sea, was the important feature of the theory; the rest was merely a mathematical artifact.

Seventy years later, I remembered the story my transfinite math teacher told and put it together with Dirac's theory. Like putting an extra guest into a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, I figured out how to borrow energy from the Dirac sea. Or, to put it another way: I learned how to make waves.

And waves on the Dirac sea travel backward in time.

Next we had to try something more ambitious. We had to send a human back farther into history, and obtain proof of the trip. Still we were afraid to make alterations in the past, even though the mathematics stated that the present could not be changed.

We pulled out our movie camera and chose our destinations carefully.

In September of 1853 a traveler named William Hapland and his family crossed the Sierra Nevadas to reach the California coast. His daughter Sarah kept a journal, and in it she recorded how, as they reached the crest of Parker's ridge, she caught her first glimpse of the distant Pacific ocean exactly as the sun touched the horizon, "in a blays of cryms'n glorie," as she wrote. The journal still exists. It was easy enough for us to conceal ourselves and a movie camera in a cleft of rocks above the pass, to photograph the weary travelers in their ox-drawn wagon as they crossed.

The second target was the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. From a deserted warehouse that would survive the quake—but not the following fire—we watched and took movies as buildings tumbled down around us and embattled firemen in horse-drawn firetrucks strove in vain to quench a hundred blazes. Moments before the fire reached our building, we fled into the present.

The films were spectacular.

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We were ready to tell the world.

There was a meeting of the AAAS in Santa Cruz in a month. I called the program chairman and wangled a spot as an invited speaker without revealing just what we'd accomplished to date. I planned to show those films at the talk. They were to make us instantly famous.

The day that Dancer died we had a going-away party, just Lisa and Dancer and I. He knew he was going to die; I'd told him and somehow he believed me. He always believed me. We stayed up all night, playing Dancer's second-hand mandolin, painting psychedelic designs on each other's bodies with grease-paint, competing against each other in a marathon game of cut-throat Monopoly, doing a hundred silly, ordinary things that took meaning only from the fact that it was the last time. About four in the morning, as the glimmer of false-dawn began to show in the sky, we went down to the bay and, huddling together for warmth, went tripping. Dancer took the largest dose, since he wasn't going to return. The last thing he said, he told us not to let our dreams die; to stay together.

We buried Dancer, at city expense, in a welfare grave. We split up three days later.

I kept in touch with Lisa, vaguely. In the late seventies she went back to school, first for an MBA, then law school. I think she was married for a while. We wrote each other cards on Christmas for a while, then I lost track of her. Years later, I got a letter from her. She said that she was finally able to forgive me for causing Dan's death.

It was a cold and foggy February day, but I knew I could find warmth in 1965. The ripples converged.

Anticipated questions from the audience:

Q (old, stodgy professor): It seems to me this proposed temporal jump of yours violates the law of conservation of mass/energy. For example, when a transported object is transported into the past, a quantity of mass will appear to vanish from the present, in clear violation of the conservation law.

A (me): Since the return is to the exact time of departure, the mass present is constant.

Q: Very well, but what about the arrival in the past? Doesn't this violate the conservation law?

A: No. The energy needed is taken from the Dirac sea, by the mechanism I explain in detail in the *Phys Rev* paper. When the object returns to the "future," the energy is restored to the sea.

Q (intense young physicist): Then doesn't Heisenberg uncertainty limit the amount of time that can be spent in the past?

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A: A good question. The answer is yes, but because we borrow an infinitesimal amount of energy from an infinite number of particles, the amount of time spent in the past can be arbitrarily large. The only limitation is that you must leave the past an instant before you depart from the present.

In half an hour I was scheduled to present the paper that would rank my name with Newton's and Galileo's—and Dirac's. I was twenty-eight years old, the same age that Dirac was when he announced his theory. I was a firebrand, preparing to set the world aflame. I was nervous, rehearsing the speech in my hotel room. I took a swig out of an old Coke that one of my grad students had left sitting on top of the television. The evening news team was babbling on, but I wasn't listening.

I never delivered that talk. The hotel had already started to burn; my death was already foreordained. Tie neat, I inspected myself in the mirror, then walked to the door. The doorknob was warm. I opened it onto a sheet of fire. Flame burst through the opened door like a ravening dragon. I stumbled backward, staring at the flames in amazed fascination.

Somewhere in the hotel I heard a scream, and all at once I broke free of my spell. I was on the thirtieth story; there was no way out. My thought was for my machine. I rushed across the room and threw open the case holding the time machine. With swift, sure fingers I pulled out the Renselz coils and wrapped them around my body. The carpet had caught on fire, a sheet of flame between me and any possible escape. Holding my breath to avoid suffocation, I punched an entry into the keyboard and dove into time.

I return to that moment again and again. When I hit the final key, the air was already nearly unbreathable with smoke. I had about thirty seconds left to live, then. Over the years I've nibbled away my time down to ten seconds or less.

I live on borrowed time. So do we all, perhaps. But I know when and where my debt will fall due.

Dancer died on February 9, 1969. It was a dim, foggy day. In the morning he said he had a headache. That was unusual, for Dancer. He never had headaches. We decided to go for a walk through the fog. It was beautiful, as if we were alone in a strange, formless world. I'd forgotten about his headache altogether, until, looking out across the sea of fog from the park over the bay, he fell over. He was dead before the ambulance came. He died with a secret smile on his face. I've never understood that smile. Maybe he was smiling because the pain was gone.

Lisa committed suicide two days later.

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* * *

You ordinary people, you have the chance to change the future. You can father children, write novels, sign petitions, invent new machines, go to cocktail parties, run for president. You affect the future with everything you do. No matter what I do, I cannot. It is too late for that, for me. My actions are written in flowing water. And having no effect, I have no responsibilities. It makes no difference what I do, not at all.

When I first fled the fire into the past, I tried everything I could to change it. I stopped the arsonist, I argued with mayors, I even went to my own house and told myself not to go to the conference.

But that's not how time works. No matter what I do, talk to a governor or dynamite the hotel, when I reach that critical moment—the present, my destiny, the moment I left—I vanish from whenever I was, and return to the hotel room, the fire approaching ever closer. I have about ten seconds left. Every time I dive through the Dirac sea, everything I changed in the past vanishes. Sometimes I pretend that the changes I make in the past create new futures, though I know this is not the case. When I return to the present, all the changes are wiped out by the ripples of the converging wave, like erasing a blackboard after a class.

Someday I will return and meet my destiny. But for now, I live in the past. It's a good life, I suppose. You get used to the fact that nothing you do will ever have any effect on the world. It gives you a feeling of freedom. I've been places no one has ever been, seen things no one alive has ever seen. I've given up physics, of course. Nothing I discover could endure past that fatal night in Santa Cruz. Maybe some people would continue for the sheer joy of knowledge. For me, the point is missing.

But there are compensations. Whenever I return to the hotel room, nothing is changed but my memories. I am again twenty-eight, again wearing the same three-piece suit, again have the fuzzy taste of stale cola in my mouth. Every time I return, I use up a little bit of time. One day I will have no time left.

Dancer, too, will never die. I won't let him. Every time I get to that final February morning, the day he died, I return to 1965, to that perfect day in June. He doesn't know me, he never knows me. But we meet on that hill, the only two willing to enjoy the day doing nothing. He lies on his back, idly fingering chords on his guitar, blowing bubbles and staring into the clouded blue sky. Later I will introduce him to Lisa. She won't know us either, but that's okay. We've got plenty of time.

"Time," I say to Dancer, lying in the park on the hill. "There's so much time."

"All the time there is," he says. ●

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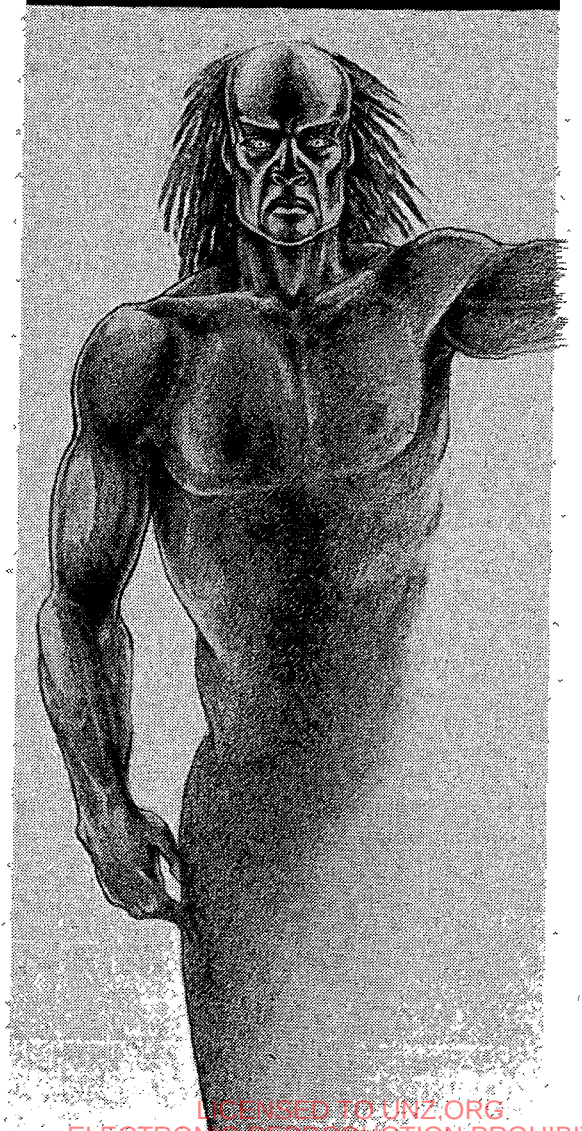
GUARDIAN

by Lisa Mason

1988 by Lisa Mason



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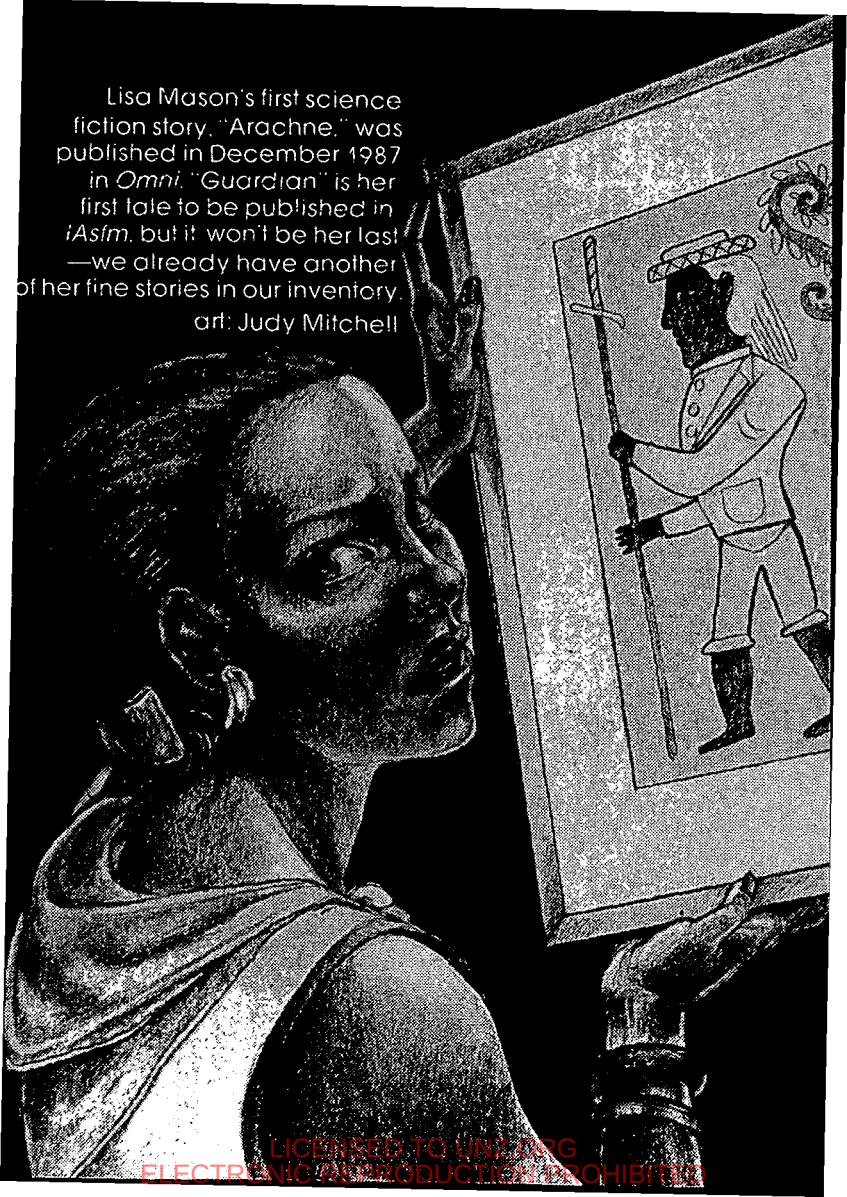

Lisa Mason's first science fiction story, "Arachne," was published in December 1987 in *Omni*. "Guardian" is her first tale to be published in *IAsfm*, but it won't be her last —we already have another of her fine stories in our inventory.

art: Judy Mitchell

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He rams the blade into the crack between the patio door and aluminum jamb. Aluminum's soft; the blade is steel. Don't they know how soft they are, how hard he can be? With a jerk, he bends the metal lip back, twists and twists, and in two seconds, he's forced leeway, made a fulcrum off the jamb itself. Then he slips the blade onto the deadbolt, tip against tip, and with a flick, he flips the lock. Just like that.

He slides the patio door open, slips inside.

No one's home. Well, of course, dude. Old Ray's been watching. Watching these condominiums. Watching the rich asshole condo owners with their cars and their VCR's. "I'm the new owner of Unit hm-hm," they say, smug. Oh yes, the new owner. All full of importance. Ray knows. Ray, who sweeps the parquet and mops the lobby and picks up their cigarette butts and yassirs when they stroll down their plushy-plushy halls. Ray, who drifts around these halls, which are nicer than the lousy little eastside studio he crashes in. Drifts all day, if he wants to, any day. And nobody notices him, of course, nobody notices. He's just the janitor, come to clean, two hundred dollars a week, such a deal.

So he marks their doors with little bits of heavy paper torn off the real estate agent's sales brochure. Folds the tags in half for springiness. Tucks the tags into the door jamb on the hinge side, and waits. Waits and watches, ooh Ray, he watches. They come home from their whitebread jobs, the tag falls out, real subtle, just a bit of paper on the thick tan carpet that Ray vacuums up in the morning. They don't come home; they go skiing at Lake Tahoe or do tennis in Carmel or go wherever rich asshole condo owners go to play; well, Ray, he sees that, too. Sees the little fold of paper, tucked up snug as a bug in the door no one's used. Ray, he knows the tricks. And then, when night falls, when it gets dark. . . .

The bitch has got a VCR, all right, and a Sony Trinitron TV. Silver tea set, Nikon with zoom lens, a tangle of gold chains, diamond earrings, for chrissakes. A goddamned fur coat all silvery fluff, and a Walkman, and a Cuisinart, and a fancy Panasonic phone answering machine blinking with her calls, she's so important. . . .

Ray piles the loot onto her balcony. Hers is one of the back units looking out on the rear lot of the apartment building on Belmont Avenue. He'll drive his van around, scale the flimsy wire fence he's already bent down, shove the stuff in. Then off he'll go to another kind of fence. But before he walks out her front door, cool as can be, just the janitor, after all; before he goes.

He goes back into her bedroom, throws open the mirrored closet door. Jacks the blade through her silky blouses, her bright dresses, slashes slashes, just to do it, rich bitch. Stops off in the kitchen. Her cupboards are filled with china plates, glasses that look like crystal, but not for

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long. Ray, he just loves the sound of breaking. Next, the refrigerator, some deluxe thing with water and ice dispensers. He sweeps his arms across the shelves, sends food and dishes crashing. God, what a mess, rich bitch. He finds a bottle of wine. Flips the cork, takes a swig, then dumps the rest onto her white wall-to-wall, what phony name do they call that color, ivory or pearl or hummingbird shit. He dumps it, and it's red wine, ooh Ray. He couldn't see through the green glass, couldn't taste anything but sour, but it's red as a baboon's ass, by God, and he laughs as the darkness spills across her hummingbird shit wall-to-wall in a bloody stain.

"So the balance is eight thousand, one hundred and twelve. That includes your first quarter property taxes," says the escrow officer.

Vaughn Kennedy endorses the check. Crazy, but her heart is pounding, her hands are damp. Biggest check she's ever written. She ruefully calculates her account balance. Biggest bite out of her savings she's ever taken. Savings she's built for six years, fifty dollars here, two hundred there. Vacation time spent at home. No car her first three years out of school. Each month, what to do without, what to put off. Reheated spaghetti, reheeled shoes. And all for this, the most important step yet of her adult life: buying her first home.

"Best condominium in the San Francisco Bay area," says the developer's agent, flashing his teeth. "In this market? Just ten percent down. FHA loan at nine percent carries the rest. You've got a good warranty on the unit, too. Congratulations, Vaughn."

"So where's the new place, Vaughn?" asks the escrow officer, checking through the loan documents one more time.

"Right off Lake Merritt in downtown Oakland."

"Oakland," exclaims the escrow officer. "Isn't there a lot of crime?"

"No no no," says the developer's agent. "That's East Oakland you're thinking of. The drug wars. This is the Lake. Northside. Near the Kaiser Center and Piedmont. Lots of lawyers from San Francisco, people from City Hall."

"I see," says the escrow officer doubtfully.

"No, really, it's very nice!" says Vaughn. She feels numb, like she's moving in slow motion, as she hands the check over and signs her name to the Deed of Trust Note. "It is, it's so nice! There's a bird sanctuary and a bandstand where local symphonies play. There's an arts festival every June. The Grand Avenue shopping district's just down the road, and I can walk to my gallery."

"You own a gallery?" asks the escrow officer, impressed.

"Manage it. The Tamarind, in the Kaiser Mall. We show primitive and naïve pieces, ethnic artifacts, some modern abstracts, antique and mod-

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ern folk art. Eclectic, but it works. The exhibit for this month just shipped in. A collection from Haiti."

That morning she'd signed the invoice for twenty-two packages express-mailed from the Egg and the Eye in Los Angeles. Slicing through swathes of packing paper and tape, she'd extracted strange riches: bright collages built to three dimensionality with contours of papier-mâché, bizarre twists of boxwood sculpture, a sheaf of painted drawings comprised of crosses, scrolls, glyphs with symmetrical repetitions, eccentric asymmetries.

The drawings were identified with a printed label that read: "Veves: ceremonial drawings that call up spirits in voodoo ritual; circa 1929." A thrill had tickled Vaughn's spine. Voodoo; calling up spirits. Indeed, she'd scoffed, shaking off the tingle of dread. She was a modern thinker, with no use for superstition. Perhaps voodoo was like modern psychotherapy, a manipulation of ritual and emotion to produce archetypal images out of the psyche. Fascinating. But spirits didn't actually materialize.

Still, the power of the veves, their strange shapes, occult designs, had been undeniable. Beautiful, disturbing. Like a secret alphabet setting forth some esoteric truth about the world modern thinkers had forgotten.

"Well, if you don't mind my saying so," says the escrow officer, startling Vaughn out of her reverie. "You should be proud. Buying your own place. Young woman like you are? Single? And black? You don't mind. . . ."

The escrow officer blushes. The developer's agent coughs and looks away.

There was a time, when she was twenty, when Vaughn would have minded. She might even make a joke later with Mrs. Russ Robinson, the cool elegant owner of the Tamarind, about poor white trash like the escrow officer, who gave her junior business school training away with her crude diction and tawdry fashion. Vaughn's master's degree in art history was from Yale.

But Vaughn says instead, laughing, self-assured, "I *am* proud. I'm doing what I always wanted to do. Oh, I could probably make more money as a computer programmer. But I love art; I've always wanted to be around art. And things are going well at the gallery. I have fun." She would gross forty-two five in salary and commissions this year. It wasn't a fortune, but it wasn't bad either, for thirty-two years old. She'd earned it all herself. She'd worked hard.

"Well, you've got the best floorplan in the best condo complex in the Bay area," says the developer's agent, relieved Vaughn hadn't taken offense at what might have been construed as a racist remark. He gleams with the profit his principal just made and the commission he'll collect. "Low homeowners' dues. Brand-new, quality-constructed, security building. Security garage. The front door has got a telephone intercom and

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TV monitor; when someone buzzes you, you tune in channel 11, and you can see who's downstairs on your TV."

"I'll take it, I'll take it!" says Vaughn, and they all laugh some more. The developer's agent gathers his copies of the closing documents and takes off. The escrow officer stuffs Vaughn's documents into a huge envelope and shakes her hand goodbye.

"A word to the wise, Ms. Kennedy," says the escrow officer respectfully, trying to make amends. "Security building, TV monitors, all that is fine. But be sure to get yourself a good deadbolt."

Ray leaves the vacuum cleaner running. An ear-splitting bizz-bizz-bizz fills the hall. He looks around. The place is deserted. Nobody's home in the middle of the morning. Well, of course, the rich asshole condo owners are all off to their plushy whitebread nine-to-fives. Middle of the morning is one of the prime times. Everything quiet. Nobody home.

Prime hit time.

Ray leaves the vacuum cleaner standing where the hall veers off to the entry of Unit 208. Places his cart full of mops and brooms and rags and cleanser in front of the angle sloping off 208's door. Extracts the crowbar from the cart.

There's a gap as wide as the Grand Canyon between the door and exterior frame. That asshole developer and his quality construction. What a laugh. Half the front doors in the whole place are hung crooked, gaping around the edges like the mouths of the condo owners who lap up the developer's phony rap.

The crowbar goes in okay. The gap isn't the half of it, though. The front door looks solid, like a vault door. But Ray knows. It isn't solid. These doors are just plywood constructions coated with thin metal skin. Inside, hollow, empty as a pusher's promise. And all he's got to do is peel back the phony face, and a space like a pusher's soul is there. Empty. Nothing but empty.

He works the crowbar in, works it, works it. He makes some racket, but the vacuum cleaner whines and shrieks in the hall. Soon the lips of door and frame are curled back like a snarl, and Ray can see the whole works of the knob's lock. Deadbolt, too. Then it's just a matter of forcing the steel bolts out of their rickety little nests of plywood. He jabs and digs. The locks go click-click!

And he's in. Well, all right, dude. Made it. Into somebody's private place, their sweet little private place, again. He shakes with a quick thrill.

Then he shakes with the cold pain. God *damn*. The Boss of Funktown Gang, biggest gang in the war, just got three successive twenty-year sentences, with no possibility of parole, and the Boss's former lieutenant,

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that punk Stingray Brown, raised prices on his dope, and Ray didn't have the price last time. He didn't have it, God *damn*, he didn't have it. So he's pissed, and he's hurting with the cold pain. Hurting bad.

Ray creeps into 208's darkened foyer. He knows where to go. One of the amenities the developer offers new owners is a cleaning job by our clean boy Ray. Right when the owner moves in. Ray gets the nails and remnants off the newly laid carpets, scrubs the new tile down, squeaks the new windows clean. And sees everything the new owner has, what's valuable, what's being put where, what's still in boxes. Good old Ray, he sees everything.

The guy in 208 doesn't have much, not nearly enough for what Ray needs. The bastard, the lousy whitebread bastard. The guy has got an aquarium, some fancy little useless thing with lacy looking fish, frilly plants, curliqued coral. Ray heaves the tank up, stinking water splashing all over, and shoves it into the guy's GE microwave. Sets the Temp Control on medium high and flicks the oven on.

"Cable TV's coming out next Tuesday to splice their system onto our rooftop aerial," says the president of the homeowners' association at the monthly homeowners' meeting. "That'll mean we can get cable at a group rate. Maybe nine or ten bucks on your dues, for a thirty-five dollar-a-month service. We're all pretty pleased."

"Arnold?" Vaughn raises her hand. "Cable TV at a group rate is fine and dandy. But I want to know about the break-ins." Her voice trembles, as much with anger as with the growing fear for her home. "All I've heard is rumors. I *demand* to know what's been happening."

Arnold sighs and rubs his jaw. He's got haunted eyes; before he retired from the Oakland police force, his eyes had seen too many bullet-riddled bodies in East Oakland streets. Eight-year-old sentries, twelve-year-old runners, twenty-year-old kingpins turning playgrounds and residential sidewalks into guerilla fire zones.

"All right," says Arnold. "There've been four break-ins in the past six weeks. Um. Let's just say they got hit bad. Friend of mine at the Hall says there's a ring of pros working the neighborhood over. They come from eastside. They come for goods they can turn over for drug money."

"Oh!" "God, what can we do?" "The bastards!" The homeowners grumble, turn to each other with troubled faces. Most don't really know each other; it's a fifty-unit complex. Behind the false intimacy of the meeting is the tangible chill of just how little they know each other.

"Six weeks!" says Vaughn. "My loan closed two weeks ago. How come the developer didn't tell me about this?"

"Well, honey, what do you think?" says Arnold.

A couple of homeowners titter. "That damn developer, I've called them

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for three weeks about my bathtub leaking," one fellow says. "Oh yeah?" a woman in a three-piece suit chimes in. "I've been waiting a month and a half for the contractor to fix my back windows." "They don't care," announces someone else. "Take the money and run."

"I think I've been given false advertising, that's what I think," says Vaughn, silencing them all. Her sense of having been betrayed almost matches the time Daniel left her. After months of ugly squabbling, and the realization they wanted different things out of life, she and Dan had tried again, had made a commitment to try for the love she thought they both still felt. And then, after a lovely Sunday brunch, and champagne, and lovemaking, her beautiful blond Danny finally said, "It's no use, babe." And he'd left for the Vermont ski slopes he wanted to live by, and she'd left for California.

Betrayal. Vengeance, love-gone-wrong, the evil eye. The dark emotions, most powerful of the loas, the laws of voodoo. Ancient betrayal, as the Dahomeans, the Mina, the Mandingues, the Rada were stripped of rank and land and heritage, were marched into ships owned by slavers. Atrocious betrayal, bound in irons, bound for colonial plantations. Vaughn supposed her disappointments, painful though they were to her, might seem banal in the balance of history. But she learned she shared betrayal with the slave women of the islands who took up the dark arts. She'd tasted betrayal as surely as every mambo whose lover was taken, not by the modern bewitchment of self-absorption, but by a blanching, the subcutaneous white tissue beneath his brown laid bare with a boss's knife. In the secret temple of the oum'phor, the priestesses of voodoo drew veves, summoned the mystères, and cried for vengeance.

In the silence cleared by her anger, Vaughn says, "I was told this was a security building. I've got a good mind to fucking sue the developer *and* the homeowners' association. What do you think of *that,* Arnold?"

"Take it easy, honey."

"Only my mother gets away with calling me honey, mister. Understand?"

"Sorry, Vaughn." Arnold doesn't look contrite.

"That's right, you're sorry. I heard there was vandalism. I heard Steve's angelfish got *microwaved.* I don't think it's *funny,*" she snaps at the couple of homeowners who titter again. "That's not pros, Arnold. That's some crazy. Listen. I've had my cat Sasha for ten years, she's like a child to me. My insurance can't replace my grandmother's cameo ring or the Wassily chair I had custom covered in peach leather. All right, those are just material things. What about *us*? Look at all the women and children who live here. What's next? Rape? I'm *not* going to take it easy, Arnold. I want some action."

"But I don't know what we can do, dear," says Mrs. Miller, the owner

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of Unit 507. A small, wizened beauty shop blond, Mrs. Miller has cancer on her lips. In a sad, futile effort to conceal her illness, she holds her fist over her mouth when she talks, so that her voice comes out muffled, barely audible through her carpal bones. The homeowners take a moment to decipher her utterance. "If they're going to get in," Mrs. Miller continues, her logic as futile as her concealment. "They're going to get in."

"No!" Vaughn jumps up, paces before the homeowners. "Pardon me, Mrs. Miller, but that's crap. This place is full of security holes. For example, Arnold," she says, turning her fury back to the president. "The garage is left open. *Open*. All day. Now tell me something. What good is a heavy-duty metal grate if it's left *open*? I demand that the developer close the door."

"Yeah, well, the developer leaves it open so prospective buyers can park their cars," he explains. "The developer has a right to do that, and we all will benefit from full occupancy of the building, and . . ."

"The right! To subject people who've already bought units to an open invitation to your ring of pros? Or worse, to some crazy? I demand that door be closed. I'm warning you, Arnold."

"I'll check it out," he says, voice tight.

"And Vaughnie, how about those fire escape doors on the back patio?" asks Melba, Vaughn's next-door neighbor who lives alone with her tiny acorn of a daughter. " 'Member how we got locked out when you were moving in, and we got the door right open with your Visa card?" Melba turns to the group. "We stuck the edge of Vaughnie's card in, and opened 'em up, one-two-three. Thought it was funny at the time," she says morosely.

"That's right, thanks,' Ba," says Vaughn. "We've got to put some crowbar-proof plating on the fire doors, on the other exterior doors, too. I demand security measures be taken, Arnold. *Now*. *Nobody* is getting into *my* home."

"All right, all right," says Arnold, and makes a note. "Close garage. Locks on escapes." He sighs. "I suppose I should mention. For those of you who do have patios or fire escape windows abutting any common area. You should probably look into getting security bars. I just ordered mine."

It's a custom job, with squared-off scrolls, some kind of chink design. Painted camel or putty or French poodle doo to match the tan stucco. Ray, he likes the custom jobs. He likes to see the custom jobs bend before the crowbar, bend like any cheap piece of shit. Ray, he likes to think of all that money and thought and time invested in trying to keep him out. It's enough to make him cry, how they try to keep him out. All that money, thought, and time, and it's not enough. It's never enough.

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The bars are tubular steel. Not solid steel. Hollow, all hollow. He can't get over how hollow everything is. Nothing solid, nothing sturdy, nothing ever really like it seems. Nothing ever real, until old Ray gets himself a fix, and then nothing matters. Nothing matters at all, except the next fix.

Not only are the bars cheap tubular steel, the standard for security bars, but the frame is bolted on with four cute little lug bolts at each corner. Shabby shit, rich asshole condo owner. Really shabby. Too expensive for them to get solid steel bolted decently? But then they don't think of that. How come they're supposed to be so smart and so rich, and they don't even think of that? Think they're safe with their poodle doo security bars. Think they're protected. But Ray knows. Ooh Ray, he knows.

He thrusts the crowbar through the bars, angles it off the middle bar, gets the head under the edge of the metal plate that's under the bolt. Jumps his whole weight onto it. *Scree!* Christ, what a commotion. Come on, fucker, give! The bolt jumps a bit out of the stucco, jumps more, then tears loose. The flimsy tubular steel bends back, easy.

Tape goes over the glass where Ray knows a handle waits inside. He makes a quick whisk with the glass cutter. Tools of the trade, dude. Ray removes the circle of glass, slips his hand in, pops the handle, swings the window open. Then squeezes through the gape between dislodged security bars and open window.

He slips into the dark. "Mama!" Stumbles on something small. "Mama! Mama!" Kicks something soft.

A heap of toys: zebras, monkeys, elephants, fur seals, frogs, kitty-cats, tigers, unicorns. A brontosaurus. A stampede of teddy-bears, for chrissakes. And a big, tangly-headed doll with a face like chocolate pudding and big brown eyes who screams, "Mama!"

Lucky kid. Little lucky kid. Little lucky rich kid, with a dozen teddy bears. What did the brat ever do to deserve all this? Just be born?

And it kicks Ray back, all the toys, the dark, carpeted room that smells like popcorn, a miniature bed and chair skirted with lace. Kicks Ray back to when he never had enough. Never had enough, and he was helpless to do anything about it. He was helpless then.

Daddy gone. Mama drinking up the welfare. Cockroaches running through her plate of bacon that she picked at while the social worker, some white lady, Ray remembers, who looked like Santa Claus's wife, looked at them all with horror. And he was helpless to do anything about it. He was just a kid.

Lucky, lucky, fucking lucky. How did B.B. King say it? If it wasn't for bad luck; I wouldn't have no luck. If it wasn't for *real* bad luck; I wouldn't have no luck. At all.

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His fury makes him mindless and calm at the same time. Get the glass cutter, dude. Take each toy. Cut its head off. Cut its little head off. Cut and cut and cut.

"I think it's an inside job, Vaughn," says Mrs. Russ Robinson. With meticulous, manicured, creme de cacao fingertips, the owner of the Tamarind takes down the pen and ink whale drawings done for Greenpeace, prepares the gallery's walls for the exciting new Haitian collection.

"Why do you say that, Mrs. R?" Vaughn can hardly keep her eyes open. She can barely get three hours of sleep anymore. She paces through her place, surveying the doors and windows until one A.M. Jolts into wakefulness at four when the garbage collectors bang the dumpsters around. Tosses and turns for the rest of the dawn, starting up at every creak and bump, what was *that*?

"Because it stands to reason," says Mrs. R. With the sigh of one transported by sheer aesthetics, she admires the bas relief of an exuberant village scene.

"Why does it stand to reason?" persists Vaughn. Her head begins to buzz, adrenalin and coffee and fatigue mixing painfully.

Mrs. R. flashes one of her penetrating looks. "First. The robberies always occur when no one's home, no one's around. A couple of them in broad daylight. True?"

"True."

"Second. How could someone from the street know when the occupant isn't home? It isn't always obvious, is it? Not during the day; a thief from the street wouldn't necessarily know who stays home during the day, who's out. Unless you've watched when people come and go; unless you know who owns which car, so when someone's car is gone from the garage, you know they're gone from their unit. All that would take a lot of surveillance, wouldn't it? So someone would have to have access to the complex. Regularly."

"Oh great," says Vaughn. "Do you know how many people have access to the complex, regularly? The newspaper carrier; the garbage collectors; the mail carrier; the contractors; the subcontractors; the electrician; the plumber; the gardeners; the rug layers; the developer's agent; the association management's agent; prospective buyers, people right off the street; not to mention the janitor."

"I wouldn't worry about people off the street, kid. I would worry about those regulars." Mrs. R. adjusts the soaring loop-the-loop of a wooden sculpture on its small dramatic dais, then turns at last to the sheaf of veves, which have become a bit disheveled in their unframed state. "I would watch those regulars. I know cleaning people always get first blame, and nine times out of ten they're good people. But that tenth time,

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Vaughn. Watch out for that tenth time. The only time I ever had my purse stolen was at Harcourt's in San Francisco, where I was working as a buyer to learn the gallery business. I left the purse on my desk and stepped away for not more than a minute. When I stepped back, it was gone. Some cleaning woman took it. Funny thing, too; someone found the purse, empty, dumped under a secretary's desk in a building on Montgomery Street. My library card was still in an inside pocket, so the gal looked me up and called me. Well, of course, I found out the same cleaning service worked both buildings."

"Cleaning people." The janitor's face looms before Vaughn. A worn face, with long, deep frown lines from nose to mouth, a troubled gully between the brows, and, underneath the obsequiousness, a dark undercurrent of bitterness. Suddenly it strikes her: *him*. She recalls how she was walking down the hallway to the garage the other day, and she heard angry grumbling, whispered epithets. And then there he was, what's his name, Ray, talking to himself. And he'd looked up, jumped up, shut up, startled, at the sight of her. Looked at her, guilty.

"Oh God, Mrs. R. what am I going to do?" Vaughn starts to cry. "I feel so ripped off by the whole thing."

Mrs. R. puts down the drawings, goes to her. "Vaughn. I want you to get a good alarm system. Wire up your whole place. Will you do that?"

"But those systems are so expensive! Fifteen hundred dollars, Mrs. R. I'm still trying to recover from my down payment."

"I'll advance you your quarterly commissions."

"You just paid me for last quarter. Your accountant will murder you."

"All right. Your mid-quarterly commissions. There's a rich science fiction writer living in the Oakland hills who appreciates esoteric ethnic artifacts. You send him an invitation to the opening. You sell him a veve or two."

"Do you really think we should sell them, Mrs. R.?"

"Do I think. . . .? Why, of course! They're marvelous, aren't they?" Mrs. R. goes back to the sheaf, lifts a veve. "So provocative. Don't you like them?"

Vaughn runs her finger down the handmade paper, admiring its grainy surface. "I like them very much. I'm moved by them."

"Then why the hesitation?"

"Mrs. R. Do you realize what these are?"

"Veves. Ceremonial drawings."

"That call up the spirits, Mrs. R. The mystères. These drawings are magical reproductions of astral forces."

"Ah, astral forces. Kid, you've been studying up."

Vaughn admits only that. Not the obsession that has begun to grip her. The ten books on voodoo she's bought at Walden's, the two rare

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books from the nineteen-twenties she's borrowed from the Alameda Public Library. The candles, the incense, the thick essence oils she's bought at a sorcery shop on Broadway.

"Well sure, Mrs. R.," she says lightly. "My mom said we've got West Indian blood in our family tree. I feel drawn. The black women of Haiti were integral to the preservation of African ritual and lore, the integration of ancient symbols with the Catholicism foisted on the slave population. A Rada tribeswoman named Rose is credited as the mother of voodoo magic. She and priestesses like her, the mambo, preserved their faith, developed it into a unique spirituality, in the face of incredible oppression."

"Interesting, Vaughn. Bring up the history at the opening. But leave this spirit business out, okay?"

"But, Mrs. R.," insists Vaughn. "Don't you see? Is it okay to sell them? I mean, the veve obliges the mystère whose astral energy is depicted to descend to the earthly plane and manifest. The mystère may possess the beholder of the veve, or any inanimate or animate object, or even another person. This is powerful stuff, Mrs. R. Even rational Western observers can't explain some of the events they've witnessed in voodoo ceremonies."

"Look here, kid. Only thing wrong with selling these drawings is that they look like hell unframed," says Mrs. R., deflating Vaughn's feverish enthusiasm at once. "So let's do the framing. Some kind of oriental looking thing, bambooish."

"Bambooish! Mrs. R., please!"

"All right, smart ass. You come up with something. And please promise me, kid. Get yourself an alarm system."

"Promise," says Vaughn. "I'll call Bay Alarm today."

Ray gets the electricity off easy as spit. Meters laid like cockleshells all in a row. And Ray, he can get into the utility room. Well, of course, dude, the janitor's got to have a key to get into the utility room. Little Miss Muff, sat on her tuff, eating her something-or-other, ooh Ray. Along came a spider. . . .

Along comes a spider, rich asshole condo owners. When the electricity is cut, the alarms won't go. Won't buzz, won't call the private security guards, won't call the police, won't alert the neighbors. Won't do shit.

And then Ray. Well, the old spider knows what to do.

Ray cuts off the ju-uice. Ray cuts off the ju-uice. Na-na, na-na-na. Ray cuts off the ju-uice.

Vaughn sifts through the veves, checks each drawing off the catalog, then considers mat and frame styles. The Egg and the Eye had mounted each drawing on a clear, three-by-three foot plexiglass sheet, sandwiched

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an identical plexiglass sheet over everything, clipped the construction shut, and hung it against black velvet. Okay for exhibition. But Mrs. R. was serious about selling each piece, despite Vaughn's reservations, so she wanted individual mounting. Still wanted, in fact, natural cotton matting and bamboo frame. These Vaughn dismissed as obvious.

So Mrs. R. sent her home for the day with the veves, the exhibition's catalog, a stack of pre-cut mats and frames, and two cans of Spra-Mount. Vaughn needed to be home, after all, for her appointment with the alarm installer in the morning.

But also. There was another reason for her request to stay home for the day. This Vaughn had not mentioned to Mrs. R. Melba had been robbed yesterday. Melba who had an alarm. Wreckage everywhere. Melba's daughter's new puppy's throat cut. A crazy. A fucking crazy. A crazy who could get past Bay Alarm. 'Ba had taken Tricia and fled to her mother's house, intending to call Century 21. "We can never live here again," she told Vaughn.

Vaughn couldn't figure it. In despair, she almost canceled the installation of her own alarm. *If they're going to get in, they're going to get in.* But then the alarm installer enlightened her.

"Got a 'lectrical failure yesterday?" he'd asked.

Vaughn thought. No one had announced it, the public utility had left no notice, but, indeed, when she had come home after Melba's robbery, all her digital clocks, in the coffeemaker, the VCR, the clock radio, the stereo, all were blinking at twelve, and she'd reset them without thinking.

"See," said the alarm installer, on hearing about Melba. "Hers is what we call an open system. 'Lectricity goes, the system goes. But we've also got a closed system. A closed system kicks back into its own power source, a battery we install right here by your door. If the power goes, the system not only stays on, it'll call the fire department *and* the police. Automatically."

"Then I want a closed system," Vaughn said.

"Well, miss. That'll be another three hundred and fifty bucks on top of your original estimate."

"I don't care," Vaughn said, secretly despairing over her checkbook.

Now she gazes at the first veve. Like a one-masted sailboat in shape, with curling stern, bow, and rudder. This is the sign of Agwe, mystère of the sea. His colors: blue and green. His realm: all flora and fauna of the sea, fishermen and sailors and boats.

The next looks like a demented Valentine, set with cruciforms and rosettes. Instead of the sender writing, I love you, thought Vaughn, he or she would write, You will love me. This is the veve of Erzulie, the goddess of voodoo. Erzulie loves jewels, cosmetics, pretty dresses. She

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eats bananas. She can transmute into a serpent. She is loved for her generosity, feared for her jealous rage. Whoever becomes possessed by Erzulie, male or female, is compelled to don a dress and makeup, sway the hips provocatively in erotic dance.

Vaughn chooses a pale gold velum mat for the next veve, the one with maize-colored bulbs like ears of corn set atop the north and south arms of its cross-like configuration. Buttercup flower bursts pose on its horizontal arms, one at what looks like the tip of an arrow poised to shoot, two at the arrow's feathers, one again at its notch.

The mat looks great. Then a squared-off white oak frame. Perfect. Clean, geometrical lines and pure color juxtaposed against the bizarre curves and variegated angles of the veve.

Bold, thinks Vaughn. Powerful. What moved some mambo to draw such a thing? The veve grips her more than any other. She thumbs through the catalog, trying to match the design against the tiny, one-inch reproductions of each work. Then there it is.

Sign of Legba, says the catalog. Legba: master of the mystic barrier between reality and the unseen worlds. Chief god of all rituals. "*Legba, ouvri barrie pou nous passer,*" begins the incantation. Opener of the Way. But also a protector. He who opens the mystic barrier to the supplicant shuts the doors of the real world to evil. God of gates and fences and walls.

Guardian of the home.

Vaughn glances at her watch. The afternoon is slipping away. She's got to attend the big opening of the Haitian show tonight. Got to; the rich science fiction writer who collects ethnic curiosities will be there. There's no way she can get out of it. *Mrr?* says Sasha, rubbing a black velvet tail around Vaughn's ankles, glancing up at her with harvest moon eyes. Trusting eyes.

"Our alarm will be on, baby," she tells the cat tearfully. She and Sasha go over and inspect the door for a moment, the wires, the control console, the backup battery. The tiny red light indicating the system is on, staring at them like the eye of a demon. If only she could believe that's enough. After all, the alarm only sounds when the thief's gotten in. And when he's gotten in. . . .

A wild notion strikes her. She takes up the catalog again, takes out a bit of tracing paper. Places the tracing paper over the one-inch reproduction of Legba's design. Carefully draws the design, then cuts out the tiny paper square, places it on the table, stares at it, stares at it. Her hands shake. To dispel her tension, she begins to clap, snap her fingers. As though pulled up by a string, she leaps to her feet, paces. Evening shadows ripple across the room. Wind-driven tree branches click against

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the window pane, click and clack, like a tapping. Oddly, Sasha hisses, skitters, tail and back puffed, into the bedroom.

And she begin to stomp, she begin to sway, she begin to clap a rhythm, she begin to say:

Papa Legba Papa Legba Legba Legba Papa Legba
Ouvri barrie pou nous passer.
Papa Legba Papa Legba Legba Legba Papa Legba
At the doors and the windows and the walls themselves, let no evil pass. Let no evil pass.
Papa Legba Papa Legba Legba Legba Papa Legba
Please, Legba, she cry, *guard my home.*

Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong. It's white when it ought to be tan.

Ray jumps up from Unit 211's door, heart thumping. He saw the bitch walk away, some piece of dark meat, in her black leather skirt and white suede jacket, toting a burgundy leather portfolio. He wouldn't mind waiting around for some of that. How he's waited, watched and waited, to get into her place. And he saw her walk away, he saw her walk away, and he knows she lives alone, so her place is empty now. But something's wrong as he peers at the alarm sticker at the bottom of her door.

He checks the carpeting for the bit of tan paper he left in the door hinge this morning. It should have been dislodged by her exit. And there it is on the floor. Well, hey, dude, what is the big deal? She didn't notice. But what's the white fold of paper stuck in the hinge? Like someone's tagging her door too, and didn't notice Ray's marker. Some other thief muscling in on his turf? Shit. . . .

He extracts the white slip of paper. It falls open. Something's wrong, ooh Ray, something's weird. A tiny drawing, for chrissakes, all squiggly and strange. Shock buzzes like a bee dive-bombing his head. Crazy, that he should feel so weird. But what does it mean? In a flash, he gets it: *she knows.*

He goes blank, panicked and blank. Nobody's known, how could anybody know? He's been careful, Ray, he's used all the tricks. He crumples the white slip into spit ball size, shoves it into his pocket, splits. This is not right, dude. This is not the night. Get out.

He goes to the elevator, punches the down button. The door flips right open, like it's been waiting for him. Inside, some old twat with a face like death. "Well, Ray, how are you?" she says, smiling behind the hand she holds over her diseased mouth. It's the old lady in 507. "My my, working so late?" she twaddles. "You should be careful, Ray. There has been a rash of robberies in the building. People are scared. Some have

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even suspected you, Ray. You of all people, someone we should be able to trust. But, Ray, I tell them. I tell them I know you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Miller." The rich white bitch, she doesn't know him from diddlysquat. But he keeps his face straight, he doesn't let on. People suspect? Get out, dude. Get out of this hellhole.

"Oh yes, I know what you really are, Ray," says Mrs. Miller. Her crackly, old lady voice sounds suddenly deep and loud, trailing off in a venomous hiss. Ray glances at her in surprise. She seems much taller than he recalls. Her pale, wispy hair spews out from her head in wild, dark dreadlocks. Her face is so shadowed as to appear deeply tanned, skin nearly as dark as his own.

"Jesus shit, Mrs. Miller," he says, desperately punching the garage level button on the elevator's console. "You look sick."

"I am sick, Ray," she says, issuing a deep, throaty laugh. She regards him with burning eyes. "I have cancer. I need money for therapy. Lots of money. The old man's pension can't begin to pay for my therapy. I'm desperate. Oh, you're a junkie, I know, but there's a good black market for body parts."

"Body parts! You're nuts, old bitch!" Ray keeps punching the down button; the elevator keeps going down down down. "Jesus! What is this, anyway?"

"Even a junkie's body parts. Your eyes. Your inner ears. Your kidneys. Your connective tissue. What's left of your veins. Parts of your stomach. Who knows, even your thieving junkie's heart."

"Heart? For chrissakes!"

Ray tries to twist away, but the pop-eyed old lady takes his hand. Her fingers feel like dry tentacles, slithery and ancient. Her diseased mouth clacks closer.

"I'm stealing you, Ray. Wait'll my fence sees you!" Over the image of the little old blonde lady flashes a sinewy apparition and, twirling all around it, glimpses of a vast, dark infinity.

"Stealing me?" chokes Ray. Cold seizes him.

"Body," says the demon. "And soul."

Police sirens wail in the night. Always do, in East Oakland streets. But this is Lake Merritt, Grand Avenue, where San Francisco attorneys and people from City Hall live. At the sound of the wail, Vaughn looks up from the pleasant excitement of the opening, sighs calmly, pours more champagne.

She's got protection. ●

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(Continued from page 18)

adventures. Now, with *Timescape,* things in the quaint world of orcs and dragons get decidedly odd.

The Timescape consists of fifteen alternate realities, all based on a science and technology instead of magic. The *Timescape* expansion comes with its own board depicting such inviting locales as the Negative Zone, the Rad Zone, and (here's a real pick-you-up) Death World.

The additional rules are simple and straightforward. The Timescape board is placed alongside the regular Talisman board. The new characters and spells are added to the mix of Talisman cards, and the special Timescape cards are placed near the new board.

Movement on the new board is random, based on a die roll. Characters on the Timescape can follow a red, green, or blue path, and the spiral of paths between the alternate realities can leave you with the dizzying sensation of being trapped.

Each of these alternate planes also has special rules that govern them. While some merely require that you draw Timescape cards (offering everything from Alien Artifacts to an inopportune Supernova), other realities let you purchase items from a Rogue Trader (like a jet pack or a handy chainsword), mutate, or enter the Vortex.

There are five different ways to get to the Timescape. The Warp Gate spell will take you there, and a card called the Horrible Black Void moves you there immediately whether you want to go or not. You can also travel on the regular Talisman board, where you can go to the mystic, the enchantress, or the warlock for their help. While entering the Timescape can bring some high-tech advantages, it also requires travelers to abandon mules, horses, and carts. Followers and any possessions can be retained.

As befits something called the Timescape, the realities represent a crazy mix of eras, most of them depicting some dimly, grimly painted future. This set doesn't make you use just your regular lowly Talisman characters to face such confusion. . . . With this expansion you can be a Cyborg, and start the game from the Vortex. The powerful Astropath starts from the Warp Gate. And the Chainsaw Warrior looks like he starts from wherever he wants to.

While Talisman Timescape offers plenty of additional creatures, adventures, and objects, and a new board, it doesn't, though, seem to be especially imaginative. Despite all the high-tech gloss, it doesn't really expand on the experiences and adventures in Talisman.

While it may be fun for fans of the boardgame, the Timescape isn't necessary to enjoy what is a classic fantasy board game. ●

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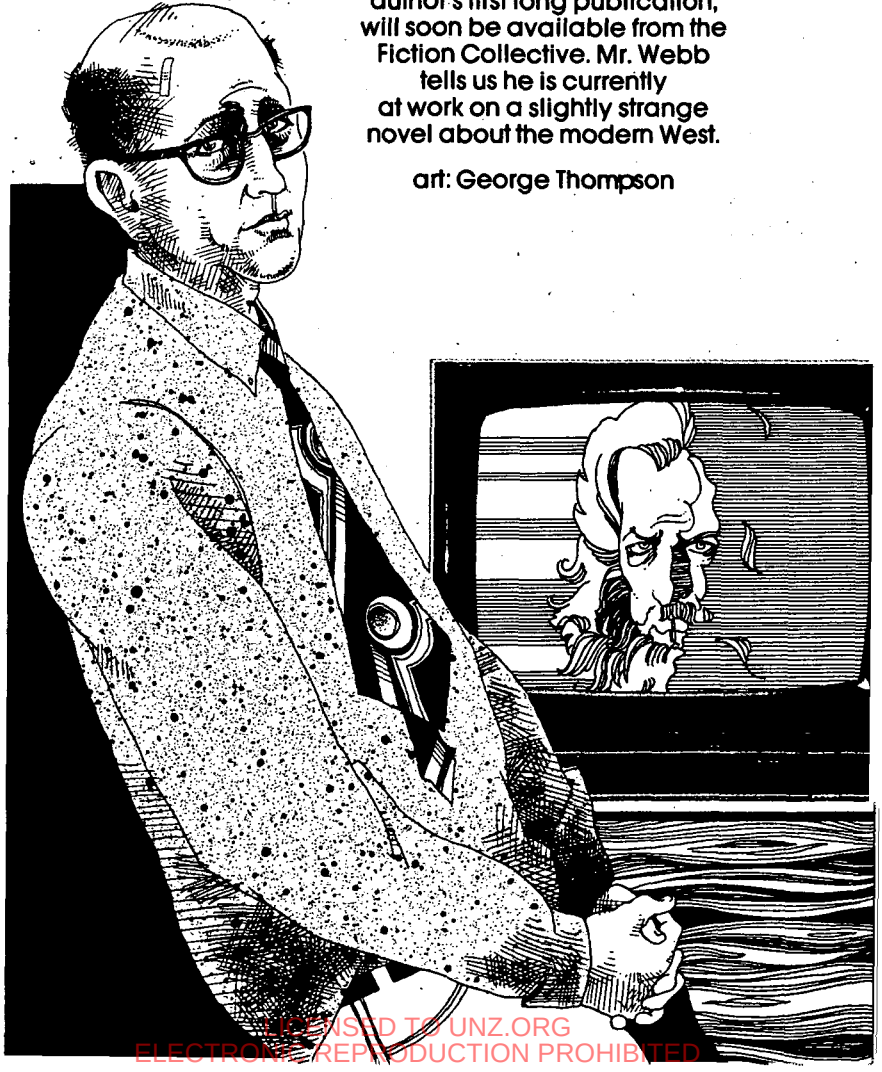
COMMON SUPERSTITIONS

by Don Webb

Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book, the author's first long publication, will soon be available from the Fiction Collective. Mr. Webb tells us he is currently at work on a slightly strange novel about the modern West.

art: George Thompson



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On his thirtieth birthday, Mike Jaynes experiences a Vision. It has been a disappointing birthday. His wife has been drafted into housekeeping for her bedridden sister. The secretary who arranged the office parties had transferred to Pubs last week—so no one at work says anything. His mother's card isn't in the mail box. Gout attacks his left big toe. The refrigerator coughs up smoke and dies an hour after he comes home.

Mike throws out most of the food (and the ex-margarine containers which held it). He hobbles down to the dumpster, heaves the plastic in; something gray and vile splashes out. He hobbles back up. He sprays the shirt with Spray-N-Wash and wads it in a corner. He takes a six pack out of the warming refrigerator, and four fresh peaches. He turns on the teevee. The cable is out. Natch. Mike has two choices. KAYS is rerunning a "Lost In Space" episode—the one where Dr. Smith demonstrates an Interstellar Vending Machine to Will despite the Robot's objections. Mike bites into the peach. KACC offers a short middle-aged woman explaining Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. She says, " 'Esse est percipi.' To be is to be seen. What does it mean to be seen?" [Mike opens a beer, throws a peach pit at the trash can, misses.] "Sartre offers us the wonderful example of the voyeur." [Mike switches over to KAYS.] "Warning! Warning! Alien life form approaching!" [Mike switches back.] "who is suddenly seen as he watches through the keyhole. Suddenly he is become thing-like, for the Other now has notions concerning his behavior. He is seen as a voyeur. He has lost his freedom." [Mike switches again.] "with Lee Press-On Nails." Mike turns the set off. He remembers his gout medicine and hobbles off to take twice the usual dosage to counteract the beer.

Mike drinks another beer, eats another peach, and begins to sing the Birthday Song. Two more beers. Mike nestles into the couch and sleeps. Around midnight, the television comes on.

"MIKE."

"What? Who's there?"

"IT IS I THE LORD."

Mike opens his eyes. A face of unsurpassing beauty and holiness fills the 19-inch Sony Trinatron. It is a human face, but surpassing all in its perfection. After all, it is the model. Mike wonders what it's advertising.

"I ADVERTISE NOTHING. I AM THAT I AM. I AM CALLING YOU TO BE MY PROPHET AND SPEAK TO THE CITY OF DALLAS."

Mike thought they'd got rid of the Draft. He says, "Dallas? Like in Texas?"

"DALLAS AND ITS METROPLEX. GRAPEVINE, IRVING, PLANO, DUNCANVILLE."

"Okay. I get the idea. Why?"

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"THEY ARE IN GRAVE NEED. SO ARE MANY OF MAN'S CITIES BUT DALLAS HAS BEEN RATED MOST CREDIBLE BY MY RESEARCH TEAM. A MISSION STARTED THERE HAS THE GREATEST CHANCE OF SPREADING."

"Why *me?*"

"YOU HAVE TWO WEEKS PAID VACATION THAT YOU MUST TAKE BEFORE THE END OF THE FISCAL YEAR. YOUR WIFE WILL REMAIN IN ORLANDO AND THIS WILL SAVE YOU FROM A GREAT DEAL OF BOREDOM."

Mike remembers the double dose of medicine. *That* explains it. Mike relaxes.

"How are they supposed to repent?"

"DOESN'T MATTER. I'VE SENT TEACHERS TIME AND TIME AGAIN. THEY HAVE MANY PATHS TO ME. SIMPLY TELL THEM TO REPENT."

"Oh. Ah, could you leave me a Sign You were really here?"

The Face darkens, "SURE."

The teevee goes off.

Mike goes to bed.

Mike sleeps late. The next day is Saturday.

He walks into the front room for breakfast. He stops.

The teevee has changed into a teevee shape of lime jello. It quivers. Mike stands and watches it for a long time. He goes to the phone.

He arranges for a flight to Orlando.

The flight leaves Phoenix at 3:45. Mike buys one million dollars worth of flight insurance from the vending machine. He's wearing dark glasses. He slinks about. Half the security force of the airport is watching him. He figures he's safe if the video cameras don't focus on him. He avoids glancing at the monitors showing flight times. He ducks into a cafe. The salad of the day is bananas in lime jello. Each of the green cubes seems to stare at him. He runs out, nearly trampling an orange-haired punker.

Mike waits at his gate, sweating profusely despite the air conditioning. If he can get to Orlando, to his wife, to weekends of garage saleing, he'll be safe. He'll beat this rap.

He begins to relax as the jet leaves the runway. He enjoys flying over the Rockies. Somewhere over New Mexico, an engine conks out. The castor-oil voice of the pilot tells everyone not to worry. Everything's under control. The plane will make an unscheduled stop at the Dallas-Ft. Worth Air Terminal and passengers will de-plane during maintenance.

In the Dallas terminal, Mike makes his way to a pay phone. Someone presses a key in his hand. It's a locker key. Mike makes his way to the

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lockers. No. 1703 contains a suitcase. The suitcase holds a black friar's coat, car keys, registration, insurance, and parking receipt. All are in Mike's name.

Mike thinks the illusion of free will is wearing a little thin. He goes to the short-term parking lot and finds the car, a thirty-year-old red convertible in mint condition. He has trouble with the standard transmission and jerks his way to the toll booth, where he pays seventy-five cents. He declines a receipt and heads out to the highway.

He drives around Dallas and Irving and Hurst and Duncanville. He pulls into a Holiday Inn. Registers, finds his room, showers, puts on the monk's robes, drives out.

At a traffic light not far from Dealy Plaza, Mike spots some conspiracologists in deep debate. He yells, "Repent!" They look up, stunned. The light changes. He drives on. He passes a gaggle of lawyers leaving a tall glass box. "Repent!" A stylish young black couple entering a Chinese restaurant. "Repent!" A group of kids on ten-speeds in University Park. "Repent!" A man in a chicken suit in front of Eco-Taco. "Repent!"

He makes for the Texas State Fairgrounds, site of Edward G. Ulmer's *Beyond the Time Barrier,* one of Mike's all-time favorite films. He makes four passes. "Repent!" "Repent!" "Repent!" "Repent!" He's getting good at it—really rolling his "R's" and really projecting.

Sun's going down. Mike returns to the Holiday Inn. He changes into his civvies and eats at Koko's. He returns to his room, watches teevee, gets ice from the ice machine, decides to drink orange juice since he's on a mission of God.

He makes the ten o'clock news. To his surprise, he isn't dismissed as a crackpot. The anchorman is solemn—asking, "Who is this man? What is his message? What can we learn from him?" Drawings of the Mystery Monk are shown. He is tall, bearded, blue-eyed, authoritarian. Mike is short, dumpy, balding, and brown-eyed. This may be easier than he imagined. He leaves a wake-up call for seven A.M.

The next day he hits church crowds. Baptist, Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Lutheran, Orthodox, Reformed, Primitive, Southern, Scientist, Four Square, United, every flavor the phone book lists.

Monday it is public buildings. The Tarrant County Courthouse, the Dallas Civic Center, the Grapevine school board, a fire station in West Lake, the various Federal and State offices—F.B.I., D.O.E., D.H.R., E.P.A. He parks his convertible and shouts until people come to the windows. Some are surprised, some annoyed, some fearful, some angry.

Tuesday he chooses orthodontists' offices. He'd worn braces and hated them. Perhaps the orthodontists, their staffs, and their patients don't need to repent more than anyone else—but certainly not any *less.*

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By Wednesday, the Mystery Monk is featured on page one of the Dallas *Morning News*. Police are said to be looking for him. Liquor and cigarette sales are at all-time lows. Wednesday night church attendance is predicted to reach new heights. Mike hits the shopping malls. For the first time, his "Repent!" is greeted by "Amen!" He makes national news at six o'clock.

Thursday he hits the two airports, the bus stations, the police stations, and the high schools.

Friday morning he makes four funerals, three weddings, an outdoor birthday party, and a company picnic. He drives back to the Holiday Inn for lunch. As he changes he decides he should be eating trail mix or something on account of his mission. He's already forgotten his attempt to flee to Orlando. In fact, he's forgotten most of his past life. The past seldom leaves room for the present—let alone for the future. One of the benefits of working for the Lord is the ability to live in Present Time.

He drives to Ralph's All-Natural Food Bar. The parking lot is full so he parks behind the yellow brick building.

He eats a sandwich shaggy with sprouts and drinks a peach smoothie. After paying he lets out one of the most satisfying belches he's let out in years. Everyone in the food bar looks at him. He smiles nervously and leaves.

A group of punks are working on his car, prying chrome off with crowbars. He charges them yelling, "Repent!"

"Repent yourself, asshole!" A crowbar smashes into his right shoulder. They are all over him. Kicking his groin, pulling his ears, spitting. He opens his mouth to yell, and a red oil rag is stuffed in. His last sight is a crowbar heading for his nose.

He didn't know he could hurt so bad and still be alive. It's twilight. He's in a different part of town. Wallet and keys are gone. Mike stands up slowly and with great difficulty. He hears construction nearby. Some workers are putting up a condo. He staggers down the alley toward them. He can't be heard over the sound of saws. He collapses again.

He wakes in the shadow of the completed building. It's a big one. He's grateful for the shadow, at least—the Texas sun's a real killer. It is too painful to move. He will lay here until he dies.

Sunday comes, and he crawls over to the dumpster and finds a half bottle of Gatorade and bits of sandwiches. He consumes these slowly in the shade and cries out to the Lord to save him.

On Monday, the Lord sends a wrecking crew to demolish the condo. Mike moans for his lost shade, he coughs because of the dust, he groans at the loud tearing noises. A garbage truck comes and Mike cries out to

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the men, but they do not hear him. They empty the dumpster and drive away.

In the twilight Mike cries out to the Lord, saying, "Lord, let me die!"

"I HAVE A TREMENDOUS SENSE OF DEJA-VU ABOUT THIS."

"Lord, why have you taken the shadow of the condo? Lord, why have you taken the food of the dumpster?"

"WHY DO YOU MOURN THE CONDO? THOU NEITHER INVESTED IN THE REAL ESTATE NOR WORKED ON ITS CONSTRUCTION."

"Lord, why hast Thou abandoned me?"

"I HAVE NOT. BEHOLD."

And Mike's mind is filled with visions of the great media coverage of the Repent! Movement.

"But my flesh has been broken."

"THEN I SHALL GIVE YOU NEW FLESH. CHOOSE THAT WHICH YOU WOULD BE MADE OF."

Mike looks around. He finds a sliver of mirror from the ceiling of the wrecked condo.

"Of this."

"SO BE IT."

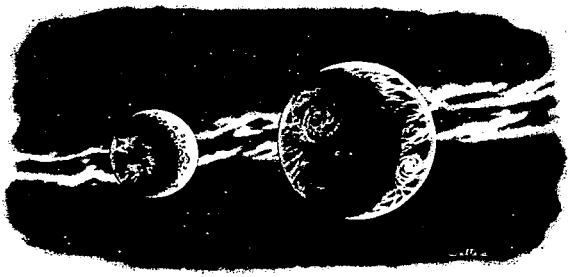
And Mike is given mirror-flesh that neither hungers nor thirsts nor feels pain. He walks back to his hotel and changes into his friar's robes. He walks to a teevee station and arranges for a press conference.

Everyone who looks at Mike sees their own face. Because of this Sign, a press conference is soon arranged. The Mirror Monk will speak at Dealy Plaza near the Eternal Flame.

The next day the Mirror Monk walks to the bank of microphones. He says, "My brothers and sisters . . ."

A sniper's bullet strikes. Mike shatters into a thousand fragments.

Two days later, a freak meteor hits downtown Dallas. The Seven Years of Bad Luck begins. ●



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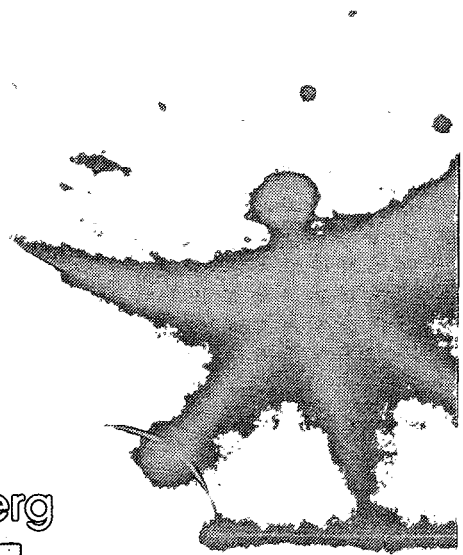
Over the years, we've published a number of Robert Silverberg's excellent novellas and virtually all of these tales have been finalists for the major SF awards. Indeed, while Mr. Silverberg has won more than a few of these awards, we are pleased to note that his most recent victories have been for stories published in *IAsfm*—a Nebula for "Sailing to Byzantium" (Feb. 1985) and a Hugo for "Gilgamesh in the Outback" (July 1986). Another of his stories, "The Secret Sharer" (Sept. 1987) was a finalist for the 1987 Nebula and is currently on the final ballot for the 1988 Hugo award. We're sure you'll find that the following is yet another of his finely crafted, powerful, and evocative tales.



by Robert Silverberg

WE ARE FOR THE DARK

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art: Hisaki Yasuda

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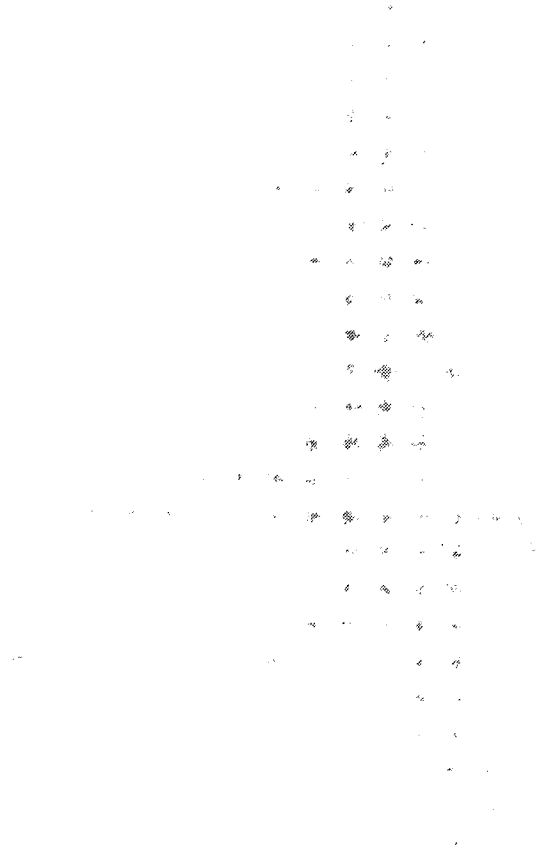

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Great warmth comes from him, golden cascades of bright, nurturing energy. The Master is often said to be like a sun, and so he is, a luminous creature, a saint, a sun indeed. But warmth is not the only thing that emanates from suns. They radiate at many frequencies of the spectrum, hissing and crackling and glaring like furnaces as they send forth the angry power that withers, the power that kills. The moment I enter the Master's presence I feel that other force, that terrible one, flowing from him. The air about him hums with it, though the warmth of him, the benevolence, is evident also. His power is frightful. And yet all he is is a man, a very old one at that, with a smooth round hairless head and pale, mysteriously gentle eyes. Why should I fear him? My faith is strong. I love the Master. We all love him.

This is only the fifth time I have met him. The last was seven years ago, at the time of the Altair launch. We of the other House rarely have reason to come to the Sanctuary, or they to us. But he recognizes me at once, and calls me by name, and pours cool clear golden wine for me with his own hand. As I expect, he says nothing at first about his reason for summoning me. He talks instead of his recent visit to the Capital, where great swarms of ragged hungry people trotted tirelessly alongside his palanquin as he was borne in procession, begging him to send them into the Dark. "Soon, soon, my children," is what he tells me now that he told them then. "Soon we will all go to our new dwelling-places in the stars." And he wept, he says, for sheer joy, feeling the intensity of their love for him, feeling their longing for the new worlds to which we alone hold the keys. It seems to me that he is quietly weeping now, telling me these things.

Behind his desk is a star-map of extraordinary vividness and detail, occupying the rear wall of his austere chamber. Indeed, it *is* the rear wall: a huge curving shield of some gleaming dark substance blacker than night, within which I can see our galaxy depicted, its glittering core, its spiraling arms. Many of the high-magnitude stars shine forth clearly in their actual colors. Beyond, sinking into the depths of the dark matrix in a way that makes the map seem to stretch outward to infinity, are the neighboring galaxies, resting in clouds of shimmering dust. More distant clusters and nebulae are visible still farther from the map's center. As I stare, I feel myself carried on and on to the outermost ramparts of the universe. I compliment him on the ingenuity of the map, and on its startling realism.

But that seems to be a mistake. "Realism? This map?" the Master cries, and the energies flickering around him grow fierce and sizzling once again. "This map is nothing: a crazy hodgepodge. A lunacy. Look, this star sent us its light twelve billion years ago, and that one six billion years ago, and this other one twenty-three years ago, and we're seeing

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them all at once. But this one didn't even exist when that one started beaming its light at us. And this one may have died five billion years ago, but we won't know it for five billion more." His voice, usually so soft, is rising now and there is a dangerous edge on it. I have never seen him this angry. "So what does this map actually show us? Not the absolute reality of the universe but only a meaningless ragbag of subjective impressions. It shows the stars as they happen to appear to us just at this minute and we pretend that that is the actual cosmos, the true configuration." His face has grown flushed. He pours more wine. His hand is trembling, suddenly, and I think he will miss the rim of the glass, but no: his control is perfect. We drink in silence. Another moment and he is calm again, benign as the Buddha, bathing me in the glow and luster of his spirit.

"Well, we must do the best we can within our limitations," he says gently. "For the closer spans the map is not so useless." He touches something on his desk and the star-map undergoes a dizzying shift, the outer clusters dropping away and the center of our own galaxy coming up until it fills the whole screen. Another flick of his finger and the inner realm of the galaxy stands out in bright highlighting: that familiar sphere, a hundred light-years in diameter, which is the domain of our Mission. A network of brilliant yellow lines cuts across the heart of it from star to star, marking the places where we have chosen to place our first receiver stations. It is a pattern I could trace from memory, and, seeing it now, I feel a sense of comfort and well-being, as though I am looking at a map of my native city.

Now, surely, he will begin to speak of Mission matters, he will start working his way round to the reason for my being here. But no, no, he wants to tell me of a garden of aloes he has lately seen by the shores of the Mediterranean, twisted spiky green rosettes topped by flaming red torches of blooms, and then of his visit to a lake in East Africa where pink flamingos massed in millions, so that all the world seemed pink, and then of a pilgrimage he has undertaken in the highest passes of the Sierra Nevada, where gnarled little pines ten thousand years old endure the worst that winter can hurl at them. As he speaks, his face grows more animated, his eyes take on an eager sparkle. His great age drops away from him: he seems younger by thirty, forty, fifty years. I had not realized he was so keen a student of nature. "The next time you are in my country," I tell him, "perhaps you will allow me to show you the place along the southern shore where the fairy penguins come to nest in summer. In all the world I think that is the place I love the best."

He smiles. "You must tell me more about that some time." But his tone is flat, his expression has gone slack. The effort of this little talk

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must have exhausted him. "This Earth of ours is so beautiful," he says. "Such marvels, such splendors."

What can he mean by that? Surely he knows that only a few scattered islands of beauty remain, rare fortunate places rising above the polluted areas or sheltered from the tainted air, and that everything else is soiled, stained, damaged, corroded beyond repair by one sort of human folly or another.

"Of course," he says, "I would leave it in a moment, if duty beckoned me into the Dark. I would not hesitate. That I could never return would mean nothing to me." For a time he is silent. Then he draws a disk from a drawer of his desk and slides it toward me. "This music has given me great pleasure. Perhaps it will please you also. We'll talk again in a day or two."

The map behind him goes blank. His gaze, though it still rests on me, is blank now also.

So the audience is over, and I have learned nothing. Well, indirection has always been his method. I understand now that whatever has gone wrong with the Mission—for surely something has, why else would I be here?—is not only serious enough to warrant calling me away from my House and my work, but is so serious that the Master feels the need of more than one meeting to convey its nature to me. Of course I am calm. Calmness is inherent in the character of those who serve the Order. Yet there is a strangeness about all this that troubles me as I have never been troubled before in the forty years of my service.

Outside, the night air is warm, and still humid from earlier rain. The Master's lodge sits by itself atop a lofty stepped platform of pink granite, with the lesser buildings of the Order arrayed in a semi-circle below it on the side of the great curving hill. As I walk toward the hostelry where I am staying, novitiates and even some initiates stare at me as though they would like to prostrate themselves before me. They revere me as I revere the Master. They would touch the hem of my robe, if they could. I nod and smile. Their eyes are hungry, God-haunted, star-haunted.

"Lord Magistrate," they murmur. "God be with you, your grace. God be with you." One novitiate, a gaunt boy, all cheekbones and eyebrows, dares to run to my side and ask me if the Master is well. "Very well," I tell him. A girl, quivering like a bowstring, says my name over and over as though it alone can bring her salvation. A plump monkish-looking man in a gray robe much too heavy for this hot climate looks toward me for a blessing, and I give him a quick gesture and walk swiftly onward, sealing my attention now inward and heavenward to free myself of their supplications as I stride across the terraced platform to my lodging.

There is no moon tonight, and against the blackness of the highlands sky the stars shine forth resplendently by the tens of thousands. I feel

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those stars in all their multitudes pressing close about me, enclosing me, enfolding me, and I know that what I feel is the presence of God. I imagine even that I see the distant nebulas, the far-off island universes. I think of our little ships, patiently sailing across the great Dark toward the remote precincts of our chosen sphere of settlement, carrying with them the receivers that will, God willing, open all His heavens to us. My throat is dry. My eyes are moist. After forty years I have lost none of my ability to feel the wonder of it.

In my spacious and lavishly appointed room in the hostelry I kneel and make my devotions, and pray, as ever, to be brought ever closer to Him. In truth I am merely the vehicle by which others are allowed to approach Him, I know: the bridge through which they cross to Him. But in my way I serve God also, and to serve Him is to grow closer to Him. My task for these many years has been to send voyagers to the far worlds of His realm. It is not for me to go that way myself: that is my sacrifice, that is my glory. I have no regret over remaining Earthbound: far from it! Earth is our great mother. Earth is the mother of us all. Troubled as she is, blighted as she now may be, dying, even, I am content to stay here, and more than content. How could I leave? I have my task, and the place of my task is here, and here I must remain.

I meditate upon these things for a time.

Afterward I oil my body for sleep and pour myself a glass of the fine brandy I have brought with me from home. I go to the wall dispenser and allow myself thirty seconds of ecstasy. Then I remember the disk the Master gave me, and decide to play it before bed. The music, if that is what it is, makes no impression on me whatever. I hear one note, and the next, and the one after that, but I am unable to put them together into any kind of rhythmic or melodic pattern. When it ends I play it again. Again I can hear only random sound, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, merely incomprehensible.

The next morning they conduct me on a grand tour of the Sanctuary complex to show me everything that has been constructed here since my last visit. The tropical sunlight is brilliant, dazzling, so strong that it bleaches the sky to a matte white, against which the colorful domes and pavilions and spires of the complex stand out in strange clarity and the lofty green bowl of surrounding hills, thick and lush with flowering trees bedecked in yellow and purple, takes on a heavy, looming quality.

Kastel, the Lord Invocator, is my chief guide, a burly, red-faced man with small, shrewd eyes and a deceptively hearty manner. With us also are a woman from the office of the Oracle and two sub-Adjudicators. They hurry me, though with the utmost tact, from one building to the next. All four of them treat me as though I were something extremely

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fragile, made of the most delicate spun glass—or, perhaps, as though I were a bomb primed to explode at the touch of a breath.

"Over here on the left," says Kastel, "is the new observatory, with the finest scanning equipment ever devised, providing continuous input from every region of the Mission. The scanner itself, I regret to say, Lord Magistrate, is out of service this morning. There, of course, is the shrine of the blessed Haakon. Here we see the computer core, and this, behind it under the opaque canopy, is the recently completed stellarium."

I see leaping fountains, marble pavements, alabaster walls, gleaming metallic façades. They are very proud of what they have constructed here. The House of the Sanctuary has evolved over the decades, and by now has come to combine in itself aspects of a pontifical capital, a major research facility, and the ultimate sybaritic resort. Everything is bright, shining, startlingly luxurious. It is at once a place of great symbolic power, a potent focus of spiritual authority as overwhelming in its grandeur as any great ceremonial center of the past—ranking with the Vatican, the Potala, the shrine at Delphi, the grand temple of the Aztecs—and an efficient command post for the systematic exploration of the universe. No one doubts that the Sanctuary is the primary House of the Order—how could it be anything else?—but the splendors of this mighty eyrie underscore that primacy beyond all question. In truth I prefer the starker, more disciplined surroundings of my own desert domain, ten thousand kilometers away. But the Sanctuary is certainly impressive in its way.

"And that one down there?" I ask, more for politeness' sake than anything else. "The long flat-roofed building near that row of palms?"

"The detention center, Lord Magistrate," replies one of the sub-Adjudicators.

I give him a questioning look.

"People from the towns below constantly come wandering in here," he explains. "Trespassers, I mean." His expression is cold. Plainly the intruders of which he speaks are annoyances to him; or is it my question that bothers him? "They hope they can talk us into shipping them out, you understand. Or think that the actual transmitters are somewhere on the premises and they can ship themselves out when nobody's looking. We keep them for a while, so that they'll learn that trying to break in here isn't acceptable. Not that it does much good. They keep on coming. We've caught at least twenty so far this week."

Kastel laughs. "We try to teach them a thing or two, all right! But they're too stupid to learn."

"They have no chance of getting past the perimeter screen," says the woman from the Oracle's office. "We pick them up right away. But as Joseph says, they keep on coming all the same." She shivers. "They look so dirty! And mean, and frightening. I don't think they want to be shipped

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out at all. I think they're just bandits who come up here to try to steal from us, and when they're caught they give us a story about wanting to be colonists. We're much too gentle with them, let me tell you. If we started dealing with them like the thieves they are, they wouldn't be so eager to come creeping around in here."

I find myself wondering just what does happen to the detainees in the detention center. I suspect that they are treated a good deal less gently than the woman from the Oracle's office thinks, or would have me believe. But I am only a guest here. It's not my place to make inquiries into their security methods.

It is like another world up here above the clouds. Below is the teeming Earth, dark and troubled, cult-ridden, doom-ridden, sweltering and stewing in its own corruption and decay; while in this airy realm far above the crumbling and sweltering cities of the plain these votaries of the Order, safe behind their perimeter screen, go quietly about their task of designing and clarifying the plan that is carrying mankind's best outward into God's starry realm. The contrast is vast and jarring: pink marble terraces and fountains here, disease and squalor and despair below.

And yet, is it any different at my own headquarters on the Australian plains? In our House we do not go in for these architectural splendors, no alabaster, no onyx, just plain green metal shacks to house our equipment and ourselves. But we keep ourselves apart from the hungry sweaty multitudes in hieratic seclusion, a privileged caste, living simply but well, undeniably well, as we perform our own task of selecting those who are to go to the stars and sending them forth on their unimaginable journeys. In our own way we are as remote from the pressures and torments of mankind as these coddled functionaries of the Sanctuary. We know nothing of the life beyond our own Order. Nothing. Nothing.

The Master says, "I was too harsh yesterday, and even blasphemous." The map behind him is aglow once again, displaying the inner sphere of the galaxy and the lines marking the network of the Mission, as it had the day before. The Master himself is glowing too, his soft skin ruddy as a baby's, his eyes agleam. How old is he? A hundred fifty? Two hundred? "The map, after all, shows us the face of God," he says. "If the map is inadequate, it simply reveals the inadequacies of our own perceptions. But should we condemn it, then? Hardly, any more than we should condemn ourselves for not being gods. We should revere it, rather, flawed though it may be, because it is the best approximation that we can ever make of the reality of the Divine."

"The face of God?"

"What is God, if not the Great Totality? And how can we expect to see

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and comprehend the Totality of the Totality in a single glance?" The Master smiles. These are not thoughts that he has just had for the first time, nor can his complete reversal of yesterday's outburst be a spontaneous one. He is playing with me. "God is eternal motion through infinite space. He is the cosmos as it was twelve billion years ago and as it will be twelve billion years from now, all in the same instant. This map you see here is our pitiful attempt at a representation of something inherently incapable of being represented; but we are to be praised for making an attempt, however foredoomed, at doing that which cannot be done."

I nod. I stare. What could I possibly say?

"When we experience the revelation of God," the Master continues softly, "what we receive is not the communication of a formula about a static world, which enables us to be at rest, but rather a sense of the power of the Creator, which sets us in motion even as He is in motion."

I think of Dante, who said, "In His will is our peace." Is there a contradiction here? How can "motion" be "peace"? Why is the Master telling me all this? Theology has never been my specialty, nor the specialty of my House in general, and he knows that. The abstruse nature of this discussion is troublesome to me. My eyes rest upon the Master, but their focus changes, so that I am looking beyond him, to red Antares and blue Rigel and fiery blue-white Vega, blazing at me from the wall.

The Master says, "Our Mission, you must surely agree, is an aspect of God's great plan. It is His way of enabling us to undertake the journey toward Him."

"Of course."

"Then whatever thwarts the design of the Mission must be counter to the will of God, is that not so?"

It is not a question. I am silent again, waiting.

He gestures toward the screen. "I would think that you know this pattern of lights and lines better than you do that of the palm of your hand."

"So I do."

"What about this one?"

The Master touches a control. The pattern suddenly changes: the bright symmetrical network linking the inner stars is sundered, and streaks of light now skid wildly out of the center toward the far reaches of the galaxy, like errant particles racing outward in a photomicrograph of an atomic reaction. The sight is a jarring one: balance overthrown, the sky untuned, discordancy triumphant. I wince and lean back from it as though he has slapped my face.

"Ah. You don't like it, eh?"

"Your pardon. It seems like a desecration."

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"It is," he says. "Exactly so."

I feel chilled. I want him to restore the screen to its proper state. But he leaves the shattered image where it is.

He says, "This is only a probability projection, you understand. Based on early fragmentary reports from the farther outposts, by way of the Order's relay station on Lalande 21185. We aren't really sure what's going on out there. What we hope, naturally, is that our projections are inaccurate and that the plan is being followed after all. Harder data will be here soon."

"Some of those lines must reach out a thousand light-years!"

"More than that."

"Nothing could possibly have gotten so far from Earth in just the hundred years or so that we've been—"

"These are projections. Those are vectors. But they seem to be telling us that some carrier ships have been aimed beyond the predetermined targets, and are moving through the Dark on trajectories far more vast than anything we intend."

"But the plan—the Mission—"

His voice begins to develop an edge again. "Those whom we, acting through your House, have selected to implement the plan are very far from home, Lord Magistrate. They are no longer subject to our control. If they choose to do as they please once they're fifty light-years away, what means do we have of bringing them into check?"

"I find it very hard to believe that any of the colonists we've sent forth would be capable of setting aside the ordinances of Darklaw," I say, with perhaps too much heat in my voice.

What I have done, I realize, is to contradict him. Contradicting the Master is never a good idea. I see the lightnings playing about his head, though his expression remains mild and he continues to regard me benignly. Only the faintest of flushes on his ancient face betrays his anger. He makes no reply. I am getting into deep waters very quickly.

"Meaning no disrespect," I say, "but if this is, as you say, only a probability projection—"

"All that we have devoted our lives to is in jeopardy now," he says quietly. "What are we to do? What are we to do, Lord Magistrate?"

We have been building our highway to the stars for a century now and a little more, laying down one small paving-block after another. That seems like a long time to those of us who measure our spans in tens of years, and we have nibbled only a small way into the great darkness; but though we often feel that progress has been slow, in fact we have achieved miracles already, and we have all of eternity to complete our task.

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In summoning us toward Him, God did not provide us with magical chariots. The inflexible jacket of the relativistic equations constrains us as we work. The speed of light remains our limiting factor while we establish our network. Although the Velde Effect allows us to deceive it and in effect to sidestep it, we must first carry the Velde receivers to the stars, and for that we can use only conventional spacegoing vehicles. They can approach the velocity of light, they may virtually attain it, but they can never exceed it: a starship making the outward journey to a star forty light-years from Earth must needs spend some forty years, and some beyond, in the doing of it. Later, when all the sky is linked by our receivers, that will not be a problem. But that is later.

The key to all that we do is the matter/antimatter relationship. When He built the universe for us, He placed all things in balance. The basic constitutents of matter come in matched pairs: for each kind of particle there is an antiparticle, identical in mass but otherwise wholly opposite in all properties, mirror images in such things as electrical charge and axis of spin. Matter and antimatter annihilate one another upon contact, releasing tremendous energy. Conversely, any sufficiently strong energy field can bring about the creation of pairs of particles and antiparticles in equal quantities, though mutual annihilation will inevitably follow, converting the mass of the paired particles back into energy.

Apparently there is, and always has been since the Creation, a symmetry of matter and antimatter in the universe, equal quantities of each—a concept that has often been questioned by physicists, but which we believe now to be God's true design. Because of the incompatibility of matter and antimatter in the same vicinity, there is very little if any antimatter in our galaxy, which leads us to suppose that if symmetry is conserved, it must be through the existence of entire galaxies of antimatter, or even clusters of galaxies, at great distances from our own. Be that as it may: we will probably have no way of confirming or denying that for many thousands of years.

But the concept of symmetry is the essential thing. We base our work on Velde's Theorem, which suggests that the spontaneous conversion of matter into antimatter may occur at any time—though in fact it is an event of infinitesimal probability—but it must inescapably be accompanied by a simultaneous equal decay of antimatter into matter somewhere else, anywhere else, in the universe. About the same time that Velde offered this idea—that is, roughly a century and a half ago—Wilf demonstrated the feasibility of containment facilities capable of averting the otherwise inevitable mutual annihilation of matter and antimatter, thus making possible the controlled transformation of particles into their antiparticles. Finally came the work of Simtow, linking Wilf's technical achievements with Velde's theoretical work and giving us a device that

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not only achieved controlled matter/antimatter conversion but also coped with the apparent randomness of Velde symmetry-conservation.

Simtow's device tunes the Velde Effect so that conversion of matter into antimatter is accompanied by the requisite balancing transformation of antimatter into matter, not at some random site anywhere in the universe, *but at a designated site.* Simtow was able to induce particle decay at one pole of a closed system in such a way that a corresponding but opposite decay occurs at the other. Wilf containment fields were employed at both ends of the system to prevent annihilation of the newly converted particles by ambient particles of the opposing kind.

The way was open now, though it was some time before we realized it, for the effective instantaneous transmission of matter across great distances. That was achieved by placing the receiving pole of a Simtow transformer at the intended destination. Then an intricate three-phase cycle carried out the transmission.

In the first phase, matter is converted into antimatter at the destination end in an untuned reaction, and stored in a Wilf containment vessel. This, following Velde's conservation equations, presumably would induce spontaneous transformation of an equivalent mass of antimatter into matter in one of the unknown remote antimatter galaxies, where it would be immediately annihilated.

In the second phase, matter is converted to antimatter at the transmitting end, this time employing Simtow tuning so that the corresponding Velde-law transformation of the previously stored antimatter takes place not at some remote and random location but within the Wilf field at the designated receiving pole, which may be situated anywhere in the universe. What this amounts to, essentially, is the instantaneous particle-by-particle duplication of the transmitted matter at the receiving end.

The final step is to dispose of the unwanted antimatter that has been created at the transmission end. Since it is unstable outside the Wilf containment vessel, its continued existence in an all-matter system is pointless as well as untenable. Therefore it is annihilated under controlled circumstances, providing a significant release of energy that can be tapped to power a new cycle of the transmission process.

What is accomplished by all this? A certain quantity of matter at the transmission end of the system is destroyed; an exact duplicate of it is created, essentially simultaneously, at the receiving end. It made no difference, the early experimenters discovered, what was being put through the system: a stone, a book, a potted geranium, a frog. Whatever went in here came out there, an apparently perfect replica, indistinguishable in all respects from the original. Whether the two poles were situated at opposite ends of the same laboratory, or in different conti-

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nents, or on Earth and Mars, the transmission was instant and total. What went forth alive came out alive. The geranium still bloomed and set seed; the frog still stared and leaped and gobbled insects. A mouse was sent, and thrived, and went on to live and die a full mouse-life. A pregnant cat made the journey and was delivered, three weeks later, of five healthy kittens. A dog—an ape—a man—

A man, yes. Has anyone ever made a bolder leap into the darkness than God's great servant Haakon Christiansen, the blessed Haakon whom we all celebrate and revere? He gambled everything on one toss of the dice, and won, and by his victory made himself immortal and gave us a gift beyond price.

His successful voyage opened the heavens. All we needed to do now was set up receiving stations. The Moon, Mars, the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, were only an eyeblink away. And then? Then? Why, of course, what remained but to carry our receivers to the stars?

For hours I wander the grounds of the Sanctuary, alone, undisturbed, deeply troubled. It is as if a spell of silence and solitude surrounds and protects me. No one dares approach me, neither as a supplicant of some sort nor to offer obeisance nor merely to see if I am in need of any service. I suppose many eyes are studying me warily from a distance, but in some way it must be obvious to all who observe me that I am not to be intruded upon. I must cast a forbidding aura today. In the brilliance of the tropic afternoon a darkness and a chill have settled over my soul. It seems to me that the splendid grounds are white with snow as far as I can see, snow on the hills, snow on the lawns, snow piled high along the banks of the sparkling streams, a sterile whiteness all the way to the rim of the world.

I am a dour man, but not a melancholy or tormented one. Others mistake my disciplined nature for something darker, seeing in me an iciness of spirit, a somberness, a harshness that masks some pervasive anguish of the heart. It is not so. If I have renounced the privilege of going to the stars, which could surely have been mine, it is not because I love the prospect of ending my days on this maimed and ravaged world of ours, but because I feel that God demands this service of me, that I remain here and help others to go forth. If I am hard and stern, it is because I can be nothing else, considering the choices I have made in shaping my course: I am a priest and a magistrate and a soldier of sorts, all in one. I have passed a dedicated and cloistered life. Yet I understand joy. There is a music in me. My senses are fully alive, all of them. From the outside I may appear unyielding and grim, but it is only because I have chosen to deny myself the pleasure of being ordinary, of being slothful, of being unproductive. There are those who misunderstand that

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in me, and see me as some kind of dismal monastic, narrow and fanatical, a gloomy man, a desolate man, one whom the commonplace would do well to fear and to shun. I think they are wrong. Yet this day, contemplating all that the Master has just told me and much that he has only implied, I am swept with such storms of foreboding and distress that I must radiate a frightful bleakness which warns others away. At any rate for much of this afternoon they all leave me alone to roam as I please.

The Sanctuary is a self-sufficient world. It needs nothing from outside. I stand near the summit of the great hill, looking down on children playing, gardeners setting out new plantings, novitiates sitting cross-legged at their studies on the lawn. I look toward the gardens and try to see color, but all color has leached away. The sun has passed beyond the horizon, here at this high altitude, but the sky is luminous. It is like a band of hot metal, glowing white. It devours everything: the edges of the world are slowly being engulfed by it. Whiteness is all, a universal snowy blanket.

For a long while I watch the children. They laugh, they shriek, they run in circles and fall down and rise again, still laughing. Don't they feel the sting of the snow? But the snow, I remind myself, is not there. It is illusionary snow, metaphorical snow, a trick of my troubled soul, a snowfall of the spirit. For the children there is no snow. I choose a little girl, taller and more serious than the others, standing somewhat to one side, and pretend that she is my own child. A strange idea, myself as a father, but pleasing. I could have had children. It might not have meant a very different life from the one I have had. But it was not what I chose. Now I toy with the fantasy for a time, enjoying it. I invent a name for the girl; I picture her running to me up the grassy slope; I see us sitting quietly together, poring over a chart of the sky. I tell her the names of the stars, I show her the constellations. The vision is so compelling that I begin to descend the slope toward her. She looks up at me while I am still some distance from her. I smile. She stares, solemn, uncertain of my intentions. Other children nudge her, point, and whisper. They draw back, edging away from me. It is as if my shadow has fallen upon them and chilled them as they played. I nod and move on, releasing them from its darkness.

A path strewn with glossy green leaves takes me to an overlook point at the cliff's edge, where I can see the broad bay far below, at the foot of Sanctuary Mountain. The water gleams like a burnished shield, or perhaps it is more like a huge shimmering pool of quicksilver. I imagine myself leaping from the stone balcony where I stand and soaring outward in a sharp smooth arc, striking the water cleanly, knifing down through it, vanishing without a trace.

Returning to the main Sanctuary complex, I happen to glance down-

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slope toward the long narrow new building that I have been told is the detention center. A portcullis at its eastern end has been hoisted and a procession of prisoners is coming out. I know they are prisoners because they are roped together and walk in a sullen, slack way, heads down, shoulders slumped.

They are dressed in rags and tatters, or less than that. Even from fairly far away I can see cuts and bruises and scabs on them, and one has his arm in a sling, and one is bandaged so that nothing shows of his face but his glinting eyes. Three guards walk alongside them, carelessly dangling neural truncheons from green lanyards. The ropes that bind the prisoners are loosely tied, a perfunctory restraint. It would be no great task for them to break free and seize the truncheons from the captors. But they seem utterly beaten down; for them to make any sort of move toward freedom is probably as unlikely as the advent of an army of winged dragons swooping across the sky.

They are an incongruous and disturbing sight, these miserable prisoners plodding across this velvet landscape. Does the Master know that they are here, and that they are so poorly kept? I start to walk toward them. The Lord Invocator Kastel, emerging suddenly from nowhere as if he had been waiting behind a bush, steps across my path and says, "God keep you, your grace. Enjoying your stroll through the grounds?"

"Those people down there—"

"They are nothing, Lord Magistrate. Only some of our thieving rabble, coming out for a little fresh air."

"Are they well? Some of them look injured."

Kastel tugs at one ruddy fleshy jowl. "They are desperate people. Now and then they try to attack their guards. Despite all precautions we can't always avoid the use of force in restraining them."

"Of course. I quite understand," I say, making no effort to hide my sarcasm. "Is the Master aware that helpless prisoners are being beaten within a thousand meters of his lodge?"

"Lord Magistrate—!"

"If we are not humane in all our acts, what are we, Lord Invocator Kastel? What example do we set for the common folk?"

"It's these common folk of yours," Kastel says sharply—I have not heard that tone from him before—"who ring this place like an army of filthy vermin, eager to steal anything they can carry away and destroy everything else. Do you realize, Lord Magistrate, that this mountain rises like a towering island of privilege above a sea of hungry people? That within a sixty-kilometer radius of these foothills there are probably thirty million empty bellies? That if our perimeter defenses were to fail, they'd sweep through here like locusts and clean the place out? And probably slaughter every last one of us, up to and including the Master."

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"God forbid."

"God created them. He must love them. But if this House is going to carry out the work God intended for us, we have to keep them at bay. I tell you, Lord Magistrate, leave these grubby matters of administration to us. In a few days you'll go flying off to your secluded nest in the Outback, where your work is undisturbed by problems like these. Whereas we'll still be here, in our pretty little mountain paradise, with enemies on every side. If now and then we take some action that you might not consider entirely humane, I ask you to remember that we guard the Master here, who is the heart of the Mission." He allows me, for a moment, to see the contempt he feels for my qualms. Then he is all affability and concern again. In a completely different tone he says, "The observatory's scanning equipment will be back in operation again tonight. I want to invite you to watch the data come pouring in from every corner of space. It's an inspiring sight, Lord Magistrate."

"I would be pleased to see it."

"The progress we've made, Lord Magistrate—the way we've moved out and out, always in accordance with the divine plan—I tell you, I'm not what you'd call an emotional man, but when I see the track we're making across the Dark my eyes begin to well up, let me tell you. My eyes begin to well up."

His eyes, small and keen, study me for a reaction.

Then he says, "Everything's all right for you here?"

"Of course, Lord Invocator."

"Your conversations with the Master—have they met with your expectations?"

"Entirely so. He is truly a saint."

"Truly, Lord Magistrate. Truly."

"Where would the Mission be without him?"

"Where will it be," says Kastel thoughtfully, "when he is no longer here to guide us?"

"May that day be far from now."

"Indeed," Kastel says. "Though I have to tell you, in all confidence, I've started lately to fear—"

His voice trails off.

"Yes?"

"The Master," he whispers. "Didn't he seem different to you, somehow?"

"Different?"

"I know it's years since you last saw him. Perhaps you don't remember him as he was."

"He seemed lucid and powerful to me, the most commanding of men," I reply.

Kastel nods. He takes me by the arm and gently steers me toward the

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upper buildings of the Sanctuary complex, away from those ghastly prisoners, who are still shuffling about like walking corpses in front of their jail. Quietly he says, "Did he tell you that he thinks someone's interfering with the plan? That he has evidence that some of the receivers are being shipped far beyond the intended destinations?"

I look at him, wide-eyed.

"Do you really expect me to violate the confidential nature of the Master's audiences with me?"

"Of course not! Of course not, Lord Magistrate. But just between you and me—and we're both important men in the Order, it's essential that we level with each other at all times—I can admit to you that I'm pretty certain what the Master must have told you. Why else would he have sent for you? Why else pull you away from your House and interrupt what is now the key activity of the Mission? He's obsessed with this idea that there have been deviations from the plan. He's reading God knows what into the data. But I don't want to try to influence you. It's absurd to think that a man of your supreme rank in the second House of the Order can't analyze the situation unaided. You come tonight, you look at what the scanner says, you make up your own mind. That's all I ask. All right, Lord Magistrate? All right?"

He walks away, leaving me stunned and shocked. The Master insane? Or the Lord Invocator disloyal? Either one is unthinkable.

I will go to the observatory tonight, yes.

Kastel, by approaching me, seems to have broken the mysterious spell of privacy that has guarded me all afternoon. Now they come from all sides, crowding around me as though I am some archangel—staring, whispering, smiling hopefully at me. They gesture, they kneel. The bravest of them come right up to me and tell me their names, as though I will remember them when the time comes to send the next settlers off to the worlds of Epsilon Eridani, of Castor C, of Ross 154, of Wolf 359. I am kind with them, I am gracious, I am warm. It costs me nothing; it gives them happiness. I think of those bruised and slumpshouldered prisoners sullenly parading in front of the detention center. For them I can do nothing; for these, the maids and gardeners and acolytes and novitiates of the Sanctuary, I can at least provide a flicker of hope. And, smiling at them, reaching my hands toward them, my own mood lightens. All will be well. God will prevail, as ever. The Kastels of this world cannot dismay me.

I see the little girl at the edge of the circle, the one whom I had taken, for a strange instant, to be my daughter. Once again I smile at her. Once again she gives me a solemn stare, and edges away. There is laughter. "She means no disrespect," a woman says. "Shall I bring her to you, your grace?" I shake my head. "I must frighten her," I say. "Let her be." But

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the girl's stare remains to haunt me, and I see snow about me once more, thickening in the sky, covering the lush gardens of the Sanctuary, spreading to the rim of the world and beyond.

In the observatory they hand me a polarizing helmet to protect my eyes. The data flux is an overpowering sight: hot pulsing flares, like throbbing suns. I catch just a glimpse of it while still in the vestibule. The world, which has thawed for me, turns to snow yet again. It is a total white-out, a flash of photospheric intensity that washes away all surfaces and dechromatizes the universe.

"This way, your grace. Let me assist you."

Soft voices. Solicitous proximity. To them, I suppose, I am an old man. Yet the Master was old before I was born. Does he ever come here?

I hear them whispering: "The Lord Magistrate—the Lord Magistrate—"

The observatory, which I have never seen before, is one huge room, an eight-sided building as big as a cathedral, very dark and shadowy within, massive walls of some smooth moist-looking greenish stone, vaulted roof of burnished red metal, actually not a roof at all but an intricate antenna of colossal size and complexity, winding round and round and round upon itself. Spidery catwalks run everywhere to link the various areas of the great room. There is no telescope. This is not that sort of observatory. This is the central gathering-point for three rings of data-collectors, one on the Moon, one somewhere beyond the orbit of Jupiter, one eight light-years away on a world of the star Lalande 21185. They scan the heavens and pump a stream of binary digits toward this building, where the data arrives in awesome convulsive actinic spurts, like thunderbolts hurled from Olympus.

There is another wall-sized map of the Mission here, the same sort of device that I saw in the Master's office, but at least five times as large. It too displays the network of the inner stars illuminated in bright yellow lines. But it is the old pattern, the familiar one, the one we have worked with since the inception of the program. This screen shows none of the wild divagations and bizarre trajectories that marked the image the Master showed me in my last audience with him.

"The system's been down for four days," a voice at my elbow murmurs: one of the astronomers, a young one, who evidently has been assigned to me. She is dark-haired, snub-nosed, bright-eyed, a pleasant-faced girl. "We're just priming it now, bringing it up to realtime level. That's why the flares are so intense. There's a terrific mass of data backed up in the system and it's all trying to get in here at once."

"I see."

She smiles. "If you'll move this way, your grace—"

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She guides me toward an inner balcony that hangs suspended over a well-like pit perhaps a hundred meters deep. In the dimness far below I see metal arms weaving in slow patterns, great gleaming disks turning rapidly, mirrors blinking and flashing. My astronomer explains that this is the main focal limb, or some such thing, but the details are lost to me. The whole building is quivering and trembling here, as though it is being pounded by a giant's hand. Colors are changing: the spectrum is being tugged far off to one side. Gripping the rail of the balcony, I feel a terrible vertigo coming over me. It seems to me that the expansion of the universe has suddenly been reversed, that all the galaxies are converging on this point, that I am standing in a vortex where floods of ultraviolet light, x-rays, and gamma rays come rushing in from all points of the cosmos at once. "Do you notice it?" I hear myself asking. "The violet-shift? Everything running backwards toward the center?"

"What's that, your grace?"

I am muttering incoherently. She has not understood a word, thank God! I see her staring at me, worried, perhaps shocked. But I pull myself together, I smile, I manage to offer a few rational-sounding questions. She grows calm. Making allowances for my age, perhaps, and for my ignorance of all that goes on in this building. I have my own area of technical competence, she knows—oh, yes, she certainly knows that!—but she realizes that it is quite different from hers.

From my vantage point overlooking the main focal limb I watch with more awe than comprehension as the data pours in, is refined and clarified, is analyzed, is synthesized, is registered on the various display units arrayed on the walls of the observatory. The young woman at my side keeps up a steady whispered flow of commentary, but I am distracted by the terrifying patterns of light and shadow all about me, by sudden and unpredictable bursts of high-pitched sound, by the vibrations of the building, and I miss some of the critical steps in her explanations and rapidly find myself lost. In truth I understand almost nothing of what is taking place around me. No doubt it is significant. The place is crowded with members of the Order, and high ones at that, everyone at least an initiate, several wearing the armbands of the inner levels of the primary House, the red, the green, even a few amber. Lord Invocator Kastel is here, smiling smugly, embracing people like a politician, coming by more than once to make sure I appreciate the high drama of this great room. I nod, I smile, I assure him of my gratitude.

Indeed it is dramatic. Now that I have recovered from my vertigo I find myself looking outward rather than down, and my senses ride heavenward as though I myself am traveling to the stars.

This is the nerve-center of our Mission, this is the grand sensorium by which we keep track of our achievement.

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The Alpha Centauri system was the starting-point, of course, when we first began seeding the stars with Velde receivers, and then Barnard's Star, Wolf 359, Lalande 21185, and so on outward and outward, Sirius, Ross 154, Epsilon Indi—who does not know the names?—to all the stars within a dozen light-years of Earth. Small unmanned starships, laser-powered robot drones, unfurling great lightsails and gliding starward on the urgent breath of photonic winds that we ourselves stirred up. Light was their propulsive force, and its steady pressure afforded constant acceleration, swiftly stepping up the velocity of our ships until it approached that of light.

Then, as they neared the stars that were their destinations, scanning for planets by one method or another, plotting orbital deviations or homing in on infrared radiation or measuring Doppler shifts—finding worlds, and sorting them to eliminate the unlivable ones, the gas giants, the iceballs, the formaldehyde atmospheres—

One by one our little vessels made landfall on new Earths. Silently opened their hatches. Sent forth the robots who would set up the Velde receivers that would be our gateways. One by one, opening the heavens.

And then—the second phase, the fabricating devices emerging, going to work, tiny machines seeking out carbon, silicon, nitrogen, oxygen, and the rest of the necessary building-blocks, stacking up the atoms in the predesignated patterns, assembling new starships, new laser banks, new Velde receivers. Little mechanical minds giving the orders, little mechanical arms doing the work. It would take some fifteen years for one of our ships to reach a star twelve light-years away. But it would require much less than that for our automatic replicators to construct a dozen twins of that ship at the landing point and send them in a dozen directions, each bearing its own Velde receiver to be established on some farther star, each equipped to replicate itself just as quickly and send more ships onward. Thus we built our receiver network, spreading our highway from world to world across a sphere that by His will and our choice would encompass only a hundred light-years in the beginning. Then from our transmitters based on Earth we could begin to send—instantly, miraculously—the first colonists to the new worlds within our delimited sphere.

And so have we done. Standing here with my hands gripping the metal rail of the observatory balcony, I can in imagination send my mind forth to our colonies in the stars, to those tiny far-flung outposts peopled by the finest souls Earth can produce, men and women whom I myself have helped to choose and prepare and hurl across the gulf of night, pioneers sworn to Darklaw, bound by the highest of oaths not to repeat in the stars the errors we have made on Earth. And, thinking now of everything that our Order has achieved and all that we will yet achieve, the malaise

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that has afflicted my spirit since I arrived at the Sanctuary lifts, and a flood of joy engulfs me, and I throw my head back, I stare toward the maze of data-gathering circuitry far above me, I let the full splendor of the Project invade my soul.

It is a wondrous moment, but short-lived. Into my ecstasies come intrusive sounds: mutterings, gasps, the scurrying of feet. I snap to attention. All about me, there is sudden excitement, almost a chaos. Someone is sobbing. Someone else is laughing. It is a wild, disagreeable laughter that is just this side of hysteria. A furious argument has broken out across the way: the individual words are blurred by echo but the anger of their inflection is unmistakable.

"What's happening?" I ask the astronomer beside me.

"The master chart," she says. Her voice has become thick and hoarse. There is a troubled gleam in her eyes. "It's showing the update now—the new information that's just come in—"

She points. I stare at the glowing star-map. The familiar pattern of the Mission network has been disrupted, now, and what I see, what they all see, is that same crazy display of errant tracks thrusting far out beyond our designated sphere of colonization that I beheld on the Master's own screen two days before.

The most tactful thing I can do, in the difficult few days that follow, is to withdraw to my quarters and wait until the Sanctuary people have begun to regain their equilibrium. My being here among them now must be a great embarrassment for them. They are taking this apparent deviation from the Mission's basic plan as a deep humiliation and a stinging rebuke upon their House. They find it not merely profoundly disquieting and improper, as I do, but a mark of shame, a sign that God himself has found inadequate the plan of which they are the designers and custodians, and has discarded it. How much more intense their loss of face must be for all this to be coming down upon them at a time when the Lord Magistrate of the Order's other high House is among them to witness their disgrace.

It would be even more considerate of me, perhaps, to return at once to my own House's headquarters in Australia and let the Sanctuary people sort out their position without my presence to distract and reproach them. But that I cannot do. The Master wants me here. He has called me all the way from Australia to be with him at the Sanctuary in this difficult time. Here I must stay until I know why.

So I keep out of the way. I ask for my meals in my chambers instead of going to the communal hall. I spend my days and nights in prayer and meditation and reading. I sip brandy and divert myself with music.

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I take pleasure from the dispenser when the need comes over me. I stay out of sight and await the unfolding of events.

But my isolation is shortlived. On the third day after my retreat into solitude Kastel comes to me, pale and shaken, all his hearty condescension gone from him now.

"Tell me," he says hoarsely, "what do you make of all this? Do you think the data's genuine?"

"What reason do I have to think otherwise?"

"But suppose—" he hesitates, and his eyes do not quite meet mine "—suppose the Master has rigged things somehow so that we're getting false information?"

"Would that be possible? And why would he do such a monstrous thing in the first place?"

"I don't know."

"Do you really have so little regard for the Master's honesty? Or is it his sanity that you question?"

He turns crimson.

"God forbid, either one!" he cries. "The Master is beyond all censure. I wonder only whether he has embarked upon some strange plan beyond our comprehension, absolutely beyond our understanding, which in the execution of his unfathomable purpose requires him to deceive us about the true state of things in the heavens."

Kastel's cautious, elaborately formal syntax offends my ear. He did not speak to me in such baroque turns and curlicues when he was explaining why it was necessary to beat the prisoners in the detention center. But I try not to let him see my distaste for him. Indeed he seems more to be pitied than detested, a frightened and bewildered man.

"Why don't you ask the Master?" I say.

"Who would dare? But in any case the Master has shut himself away from us all since the other night."

"Ah. Then ask the Oracle."

"The Oracle offers only mysteries and redundancies, as usual."

"I can't offer anything better," I tell him. "Have faith in the Master. Accept the data of your own scanner until you have solid reason to doubt it. Trust God."

Kastel, seeing I can tell him nothing useful, and obviously uneasy now over having expressed these all but sacrilegious suppositions about the Master to me, asks a blessing of me, and I give it, and he goes. But others come after him, one by one—hesitantly, even fearfully, as though expecting me to turn them away in scorn. High and low, haughty and humble, they seek audiences with me. I understand now what is happening. With the Master in seclusion, the community is leaderless in this difficult moment. On him they dare not intrude under any circum-

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stances, if he has given the sign that he is not to be approached. I am the next highest ranking member of the hierarchy currently in residence at the Sanctuary. That I am of another House, and that between the Master and me lies an immense gulf of age and primacy, does not seem to matter to them just now. So it is to me that they come, asking for guidance, comfort, whatever. I give them what I can—platitudes, mainly—until I begin to feel hollow and cynical. Toward evening the young astronomer comes to me, she who had guided me through the observatory on the night of the great revelation. Her eyes are red and swollen, with dark rings below them. By now I have grown expert at offering these Sanctuary people the bland reassurances that are the best I can provide for them, but as I launch into what has become my standard routine I see that it is doing more harm to her than good—she begins to tremble, tears roll down her cheeks, she shakes her head and looks away, shivering—and suddenly my own façade of spiritual authority and philosophical detachment crumbles, and I am as troubled and confused as she is. I realize that she and I stand at the brink of the same black abyss. I begin to feel myself toppling forward into it. We reach for each other and embrace in a kind of wild defiance of our fears. She is half my age. Her skin is smooth, her flesh is firm. We each grasp for whatever comfort we can find. Afterward she seems stunned, numbed, dazed. She dresses in silence.

"Stay," I urge her. "Wait until morning."

"Please, your grace—no—no—"

But she manages a faint smile. Perhaps she is trying to tell me that though she is amazed by what we have done she feels no horror and perhaps not even regret. I hold the tips of her fingers in my hands for a moment, and we kiss quickly, a dry, light, chaste kiss, and she goes.

Afterward I experience a strange new clarity of mind. It is as if this unexpected coupling has burned away a thick fog of the soul and allowed me to think clearly once again.

In the night, which for me is a night of very little sleep, I contemplate the events of my stay at the House of Sanctuary and I come to terms, finally, with the obvious truth that I have tried to avoid for days. I remember the Master's casual phrase at my second audience with him, as he told me of his suspicion that certain colonists must be deviating from the tenets of Darklaw: "Those whom we, *acting through your House,* have selected . . ." Am I being accused of some malfeasance? Yes. Of course. I am the one who chose the ones who have turned away from the plan. It has been decided that the guilt is to fall upon me. I should have seen it much earlier, but I have been distracted, I suppose, by troublesome emotions. Or else I have simply been unwilling to see.

* * *

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I decide to fast today. When they bring me my morning meal-tray they will find a note from me, instructing them not to come to me again until I notify them.

I tell myself that this is not so much an act of penitence as one of purgation. Fasting is not something that the Order asks of us. For me it is a private act, one which I feel brings me closer to God. In any case my conscience is clear; it is simply that there are times when I think better on an empty stomach, and I am eager now to maintain and deepen that lucidity of perception that came upon me late the previous evening. I have fasted before, many times, when I felt a similar need. But then, when I take my morning shower, I dial it cold. The icy water burns and stings and flays; I have to compel myself to remain under it, but I do remain, and I hold myself beneath the shower head much longer than I might ordinarily have stayed there. That can only be penitence. Well, so be it. But penitence for what? I am guilty of no fault. Do they really intend to make me the scapegoat? Do I intend to offer myself to expiate the general failure? Why should I? Why do I punish myself now?

All that will be made known to me later. If I have chosen to impose a day of austerity and discomfort upon myself, there must be a good reason for it, and I will understand in good time.

Meanwhile I wear nothing but a simple linen robe of a rough texture, and savor the roughness against my skin. My stomach, by mid-morning, begins to grumble and protest, and I give it a glass of water, as though to mock its needs. A little later the vision of a fine meal assails me, succulent grilled fish on a shining porcelain plate, cool white wine in a sparkling crystal goblet. My throat goes dry, my head throbs. But instead of struggling against these tempting images I encourage them, I invite my traitor mind to do its worst: I add platters of gleaming red grapes to the imaginary feast, cheeses, loaves of bread fresh from the oven. The fish course is succeeded by roast lamb, the lamb by skewers of beef, the wine in the glass is now a fine red Coonawarra, there is rare old port to come afterward. I fantasize such gluttonies that they become absurd, and I lose my appetite altogether.

The hours go by and I begin to drift into the tranquility that for me is the first sign of the presence of God close at hand. Yet I find myself confronting a barrier. Instead of simply accepting His advent and letting Him engulf me, I trouble myself with finicky questions. Is He approaching me, I wonder? Or am I moving toward Him? I tell myself that the issue is an empty one. He is everywhere. It is the power of God which sets us in motion, yes, but He is motion incarnate. It is pointless to speak of my approaching Him, or His approaching me: those are two ways of describing the same thing. But while I contemplate such matters my mind itself holds me apart from Him.

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I imagine myself in a tiny ship, drifting toward the stars. To make such a voyage is not what I desire; but it is a useful focus for my reverie. For the journey to the stars and the journey toward God are one thing and the same. It is the journey into reality.

Once, I know, these things were seen in a different light. But it was inevitable that as we began to penetrate the depths of space we would come to see the metaphysical meaning of the venture on which we had embarked. And if we had not, we could not have proceeded. The curve of secular thought had extended as far as it could reach, from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, and had begun to crack under its own weight; just when we were beginning to believe that *we* were God, we rediscovered the understanding that we were not. The universe was too huge for us to face alone. That new ocean was so wide, and our boats so very small.

I urge my little craft onward. I set sail at last into the vastness of the Dark. My voyage has begun. God embraces my soul. He bids me be welcome in His kingdom. My heart is eased.

Under the Master's guidance we have all come to know that in our worldly lives we see only distortions—shadows on the cave wall. But as we penetrate the mysteries of the universe we are permitted to perceive things as they really are. The entry into the cosmos is the journey into the sublime, the literal attainment of heaven. It is a post-Christian idea: voyages must be undertaken, motion must never cease, we must seek Him always. In the seeking is the finding.

Gradually, as I reflect on these things yet again, the seeking ends for me and the finding begins, and my way becomes clear. I will resist nothing. I will accept everything. Whatever is required of me, that will I do, as always.

It is night, now. I am beyond any hunger and I feel no need for sleep. The walls of my chamber seem transparent to me and I can cast my vision outward to all the world, the heavy surging seas and the close blanket of the sky, the mountains and valleys, the rivers, the fields. I feel the nearness of billions of souls. Each human soul is a star: it glows with unique fire, and each has its counterpart in the heavens. There is one star that is the Master, and one that is Kastel, and one that is the young astronomer who shared my bed. And somewhere there is a star that is me. My spirit goes outward at last, it roves the distant blackness, it journeys on and on, to the ends of the universe. I soar above the Totality of the Totality. I look upon the face of God.

When the summons comes from the Master, shortly before dawn, I go to him at once. The rest of the House of Sanctuary sleeps. All is silent. Taking the garden path uphill, I experience a marvelous precision of sight: as though by great magnification I perceive the runnels and

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grooves on each blade of grass, the minute jagged teeth left by the mower as it bit it short, the glistening droplets of dew on the jade surface. Blossoms expand toward the pale new light now streaming out of the east as though they are coming awake. On the red earth of the path, strutting like dandies in a summer parade, are little shining scarlet-backed beetles with delicate black legs that terminate in intricate hairy feet. A fine mist rises from the ground. Within the silence I hear a thousand tiny noises.

The Master seems to be bursting with youthful strength, vitality, a mystic energy. He sits motionless, waiting for me to speak. The star-screen behind him is darkened, an ebony void, infinitely deep. I see the fine lines about his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His skin is pale, like a baby's. He could be six weeks old, or six thousand years.

His silence is immense.

"You hold me responsible?" I say at last.

He stares for a long while. "Don't you?"

"I am the Lord Magistrate of Senders. If there has been a failure, the fault must be mine."

"Yes. The fault must be yours."

He is silent again.

It is very easy, accepting this, far easier than I would have thought only the day before.

He says after a time, "What will you do?"

"You have my resignation."

"From your magistracy?"

"From the Order," I say. "How could I remain a priest, having been a Magistrate?"

"Ah. But you must."

The pale gentle eyes are inescapable.

"Then I will be a priest on some other world," I tell him. "I could never stay here. I respectfully request release from my vow of renunciation."

He smiles. I am saying exactly the things he hoped I would say.

"Granted."

It is done. I have stripped myself of rank and power. I will leave my House and my world; I will go forth into the Dark, although long ago I had gladly given that great privilege up. The irony is not lost on me. For all others it is heart's desire to leave Earth, for me it is merely the punishment for having failed the Mission. My penance will be my exile and my exile will be my penance. It is the defeat of all my work and the collapse of my vocation. But I must try not to see it that way. This is the beginning of the next phase of my life, nothing more. God will comfort me. Through my fall He has found a way of calling me to Him.

I wait for a gesture of dismissal, but it does not come.

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"You understand," he says after a time, "that the Law of Return will hold, even for you?"

He means the prime tenet of Darklaw, the one that no one has ever violated. Those who depart from Earth may not come back to it. Ever. The journey is a one-way trip.

"Even for me," I say. "Yes. I understand."

I stand before a Velde doorway like any other, one that differs in no way from the one that just a short time before had carried me instantaneously halfway around the world, home from Sanctuary to the House of Senders. It is a cubicle of black glass, four meters high, three meters wide, three meters deep. A pair of black-light lenses face each other like owlish eyes on its inner sides. From the rear wall jut the three metal cones that are the discharge points.

How many journeys have I made by way of transmitting stations such as this one? Five hundred? A thousand? How many times have I been scanned, measured, dissected, stripped down to my component baryons, replicated: annihilated *here,* created *there,* all within the same moment? And stepped out of a receiver, intact, unchanged, at some distant point, Paris, Karachi, Istanbul, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam?

This doorway is no different from the ones through which I stepped those other times. But this journey will be unlike all those others. I have never left Earth before, not even to go to Mars, not even to the Moon. There has been no reason for it. But now I am to leap to the stars. Is it the scope of the leap that I fear? But I know better. The risks are not appreciably greater in a journey of twenty light-years than in one of twenty kilometers. Is it the strangeness of the new worlds which I will confront that arouses this uneasiness in me? But I have devoted my life to building those worlds. What is it, then? The knowledge that once I leave this House I will cease to be Lord Magistrate of the Senders, and become merely a wandering pilgrim?

Yes. Yes, I think that that is it. My life has been a comfortable one of power and assurance, and now I am entering the deepest unknown, leaving all that behind, leaving everything behind, giving up my House, relinquishing my magistracy, shedding all that I have been except for my essence itself, from which I can never be parted. It is a great severance. Yet why do I hesitate? I have asked so many others, after all, to submit to that severance. I have bound so many others, after all, by the unbending oaths of Darklaw. Perhaps it takes more time to prepare oneself than I have allowed. I have given myself very short notice indeed.

But the moment of uneasiness passes. All about me are friendly faces, men and women of my House, come to bid me a safe journey. Their eyes

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are moist, their smiles are tender. They know they will never see me again. I feel their love and their loyalty, and it eases my soul.

Ancient words drift through my mind.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Yes. And my body also.

Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: thou art God from everlasting, and world without end.

Yes. And then:

The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament showeth His handiwork.

There is no sensation of transition. I was there; now I am here. I might have traveled no further than from Adelaide to Melbourne, or from Brisbane to Cairns. But I am very far from home now. The sky is amber, with swirls of blue. On the horizon is a great dull warm red mass, like a gigantic glowing coal, very close by. At the zenith is a smaller and brighter star, much more distant.

This world is called Cuchulain. It is the third moon of the subluminous star Gwydion, which is the dark companion of Lalande 21185. I am eight light-years from Earth. Cuchulain is the Order's prime outpost in the stars, the home of Second Sanctuary. Here is where I have chosen to spend my years of exile. The fallen magistrate, the broken vessel.

The air is heavy and mild. Crazy whorls of thick green ropy vegetation entangle everything, like a furry kelp that has infested the land. As I step from the Velde doorway I am confronted by a short, crisp little man in dark priestly robes. He is tonsured and wears a medallion of high office, though it is an office two or three levels down from the one that had been mine.

He introduces himself as Procurator-General Guardiano. Greeting me by name, he expresses his surprise at my most unexpected arrival in his diocese. Everyone knows that those who serve at my level of the Order must renounce all hope of emigration from Earth.

"I have resigned my magistracy," I tell him. "No," I say. "Actually I've been dismissed. For cause. I've been reassigned to the ordinary priesthood."

He stares, plainly shocked and stunned.

"It is still an honor to have you here, your grace," he says softly, after a moment.

I go with him to the chapter house, not far away. The gravitational pull here is heavier than Earth's, and I find myself leaning forward as I walk and pulling my feet after me as though the ground is sticky. But such incidental strangenesses as this are subsumed, to my surprise, by

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a greater familiarity: this place is not as alien as I had expected. I might merely be in some foreign land, and not on another world. The full impact of my total and final separation from Earth, I know, will not hit me until later.

We sit together in the refectory, sipping glass after glass of a sweet strong liqueur. Procurator-General Guardiano seems flustered by having someone of my rank appear without warning in his domain, but he is handling it well. He tries to make me feel at home. Other priests of the higher hierarchy appear—the word of my arrival must be traveling fast—and peer into the room. He waves them away. I tell him, briefly, the reasons for my downfall. He listens gravely and says, "Yes. We know that the outer worlds are in rebellion against Darklaw."

"Only the outer worlds?"

"So far, yes. It's very difficult for us to get reliable data."

"Are you saying that they've closed the frontier to the Order?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. There's still free transit to every colony, and chapels everywhere. But the reports from the outer worlds are growing increasingly mysterious and bizarre. What we've decided is that we're going to have to send an Emissary Plenipotentiary to some of the rebel worlds to get the real story."

"A spy, you mean?"

"A spy? No. Not a spy. A teacher. A guide. A prophet, if you will. One who can bring them back to the true path." Guardiano shakes his head. "I have to tell you that all this disturbs me profoundly, this repudiation of Darklaw, these apparent breaches of the plan. It begins to occur to me—though I know the Master would have me strung up for saying any such thing—that we may have been in error from the beginning." He gives me a conspiratorial look. I smile encouragingly. He goes on, "I mean, this whole elitist approach of ours, the Order maintaining its monopoly over the mechanism of matter transmission, the Order deciding who will go to the stars and who will not, the Order attempting to create new worlds in our own image—" He seems to be talking half to himself. "Well, apparently it hasn't worked, has it? Do I dare say it? They're living just as they please, out there. We can't control them at long range. Your own personal tragedy is testimony to that. And yet, and yet—to think that we would be in such a shambles, and that a Lord Magistrate would be compelled to resign, and go into exile—exile, yes, that's what it is!—"

"Please," I say. His ramblings are embarrassing; and painful, too, for there may be seeds of truth in them. "What's over is over. All I want now is to live out my years quietly among the people of the Order on this world. Just tell me how I can be of use. Any work at all, even the simplest—"

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"A waste, your grace. An absolute shameful waste."

"Please."

He fills my glass for the fourth or fifth time. A crafty look has come into his eyes. "You would accept any assignment I give you?"

"Yes. Anything."

"Anything?" he says.

I see myself sweeping the chapel house stairs, polishing sinks and tables, working in the garden on my knees.

"Even if there is risk?" he says. "Discomfort?"

"Anything."

He says, "You will be our Plenipotentiary, then."

There are two suns in the sky here, but they are not at all like Cuchulain's two, and the frosty air has a sharp sweet sting to it that is like nothing I have ever tasted before, and everything I see is haloed by a double shadow, a rim of pale red shading into deep, mysterious azure. It is very cold in this place. I am fourteen light-years from Earth.

A woman is watching me from just a few meters away. She says something I am unable to understand.

"Can you speak Anglic?" I reply.

"Anglic. All right." She gives me a chilly, appraising look. "What are you? Some kind of priest?"

"I was Lord Magistrate of the House of Senders, yes."

"Where?"

"Earth."

"On *Earth*? Really?"

I nod. "What is the name of this world?"

"Let me ask the questions," she says. Her speech is odd, not so much a foreign accent as a foreign intonation, a curious sing-song, vaguely menacing. Standing face to face just outside the Velde station, we look each other over. She is thick-shouldered, deep-chested, with a flat-featured face, close-cropped yellow hair, green eyes, a dusting of light red freckles across her heavy cheekbones. She wears a heavy blue jacket, fringed brown leggings, blue leather boots, and she is armed. Behind her I see a muddy road cut through a flat snowy field, some low rambling metal buildings with snow piled high on their roofs, and a landscape of distant jagged towering mountains whose sharp black spires are festooned with double-shadowed glaciers. An icy wind rips across the flat land. We are a long way from those two suns, the fierce blue-white one and its cooler crimson companion. Her eyes narrow and she says, "Lord Magistrate, eh? The House of Senders. Really?"

"This was my cloak of office. This medallion signified my rank in the Order."

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"I don't see them."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"You have no rank here. You hold no office here."

"Of course," I say. "I realize that. Except such power as Darklaw confers on me."

"Darklaw?"

I stare at her in some dismay. "Am I beyond the reach of Darklaw so soon?"

"It's not a word I hear very often. Shivering, are you? You come from a warmer place?"

"Earth," I say. "South Australia. It's warm there, yes."

"Earth. South Australia." She repeats the words as though they are mere noises to her. "We have some Earthborn here, still. Not many. They'll be glad to see you, I suppose. The name of this world is Zima."

"Zima." A good strong sound. "What does that mean?"

"Mean?"

"The name must mean something. This planet wasn't named Zima just because someone liked the way it sounded."

"Can't you see why?" she asks, gesturing toward the far-off ice-shrouded mountains.

"I don't understand."

"Anglic is the only language you speak?"

"I know some Espanol and some Deutsch."

She shrugs. "Zima is Russkiye. It means Winter."

"And this is wintertime on Winter?"

"It is like this all the year round. And so we call the world Zima."

"Zima," I say. "Yes."

"We speak Russkiye here, mostly, though we know Anglic too. Everybody knows Anglic, everywhere in the Dark. It is necessary. You really speak no Russkiye?"

"Sorry."

"Ty shto, s pizdy sarvalsa?" she says, staring at me.

I shrug and am silent.

"Bros' dumat' zhopay!"

I shake my head sadly.

"Idi v zhopu!"

"No," I say. "Not a word."

She smiles, for the first time. "I believe you."

"What were you saying to me in Russkiye?"

"Very abusive things. I will not tell you what they were. If you understood, you would have become very angry. They were filthy things, mockery. At least you would have laughed, hearing such vile words. I am

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named Marfa Ivanovna. You must talk with the boyars. If they think you are a spy, they will kill you."

I try to hide my astonishment, but I doubt that I succeed. *Kill?* What sort of world have we built here? Have these Zimans reinvented the middle ages?

"You are frightened?" she asks.

"Surprised," I say.

"You should lie to them, if you are a spy. Tell them you come to bring the Word of God, only. Or something else that is harmless. I like you. I would not want them to kill you."

A spy? No. As Guardiano would say, I am a teacher, a guide, a prophet, if you will. Or as I myself would say, I am a pilgrim, one who seeks atonement, one who seeks forgiveness.

"I'm not a spy, Marfa Ivanovna," I say.

"Good. Good. Tell them that." She puts her fingers in her mouth and whistles piercingly, and three burly bearded men in fur jackets appear as though rising out of the snowbanks. She speaks with them a long while in Russkiye. Then she turns to me. "These are the boyars Ivan Dimitrovich, Pyotr Pyotrovich, and Ivan Pyotrovich. They will conduct you to the voivode Ilya Alexandrovich, who will examine you. You should tell the voivode the truth."

"Yes," I say. "What else is there to tell?"

Guardiano had told me before I left Cuchulain, of course, that the world I was going to had been settled by emigrants from Russia. It was one of the first to be colonized, in the early years of the Mission. One would expect our Earthly ways to begin dropping away, and something like an indigenous culture to have begun evolving, in that much time. But I am startled, all the same, by how far they have drifted. At least Marfa Ivanova—who is, I imagine, a third-generation Ziman—knows what Darklaw is. But is it observed? They have named their world Winter, at any rate, and not New Russia or New Moscow or something like that, which Darklaw would have forbidden. The new worlds in the stars must not carry such Earthly baggage with them. But whether they follow any of the other laws, I cannot say. They have reverted to their ancient language here, but they know Anglic as well, as they should. The robe of the Order means something to her, but not, it would seem, a great deal. She speaks of spies, of killing. Here at the outset of my journey I can see already that there will be many surprises for me as I make my way through the Dark.

The voivode Ilya Alexandrovich is a small, agile-looking man, brown-faced, weatherbeaten, with penetrating blue eyes and a great shock of thick, coarse white hair. He could be any age at all, but from his vigor

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and seeming reserves of power I guess that he is about forty. In a harsh climate the face is quickly etched with the signs of age, but this man is probably younger than he looks.

Voivode, he tells me, means something like "mayor," or "district chief." His office, brightly lit and stark, is a large ground-floor room in an unassuming two-story aluminum shack that is, I assume, the town hall. There is no place for me to sit. I stand before him, and the three husky boyars, who do not remove their fur jackets, stand behind me, arms folded ominously across their breasts.

I see a desk, a faded wall map, a terminal. The only other thing in the room is the immense bleached skull of some alien beast on the floor beside his desk. It is an astounding sight, two meters long and a meter high, with two huge eye-sockets in the usual places and a third set high between them, and a pair of colossal yellow tusks that rise straight from the lower jaw almost to the ceiling. One tusk is chipped at the tip, perhaps six centimeters broken off. He sees me staring at it. "You ever see anything like that?" he asks, almost belligerently.

"Never. What is it?"

"We call it a bolshoi. Animal of the northern steppe, very big. You see one five kilometers away and you shit your trousers, I tell you for true." He grins. "Maybe we send one back to Earth some day to show them what we have here. Maybe."

His Anglic is much more heavily accented than Marfa Ivanovna's, and far less fluent. He seems unable to hold still very long. The district that he governs, he tells me, is the largest on Zima. It looks immense indeed on his map, a vast blue area, a territory that seems to be about the size of Brazil. But when I take a closer look I see three tiny dots clustered close together in the center of the blue zone. They are, I assume, the only villages. He follows my gaze and strides immediately across the room to tap the map. "This is Tyomni," he says. "That is this village. This one here, it is Doch. This one, Sin. In this territory we have six thousand people altogether. There are two other territories, here and here." He points to regions north and south of the blue zone. A yellow area and a pink one indicate the other settlements, each with two towns. The whole human population of this planet must be no more than ten thousand.

Turning suddenly toward me, he says, "You are big priest in the Order?"

"I was Lord Magistrate, yes. The House of Senders."

"Senders. Ah. I know Senders. The ones who choose the colonists. And who run the machinery, the transmitters."

"That's right."

"And you are the bolshoi Sender? The big man, the boss, the captain?"

"I was, yes. This robe, this medallion, those are signs of my office."

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"A very big man. Only instead of sending, you are sent."

"Yes," I say.

"And you come here, why? Nobody from Earth comes here in ten, fifteen years." He no longer makes even an attempt to conceal his suspicions, or his hostility. His cold eyes flare with anger. "Being boss of Senders is not enough for you? You want to tell us how to run Zima? You want to run Zima yourself?"

"Nothing of that sort, believe me."

"Then what?"

"Do you have a map of the entire Dark?"

"The Dark," he says, as though the word is unfamiliar to him. Then he says something in Russkiye to one of the boyars. The man leaves the room and returns, a few moments later, with a wide, flat black screen that turns out to be a small version of the wall screen in the Master's office. He lights it and they all look expectantly at me.

The display is a little different from the one I am accustomed to, since it centers on Zima, not on Earth, but the glowing inner sphere that marks the location of the Mission stars is easy enough to find. I point to that sphere and I remind them, apologizing for telling them what they already know, that the great plan of the Mission calls for an orderly expansion through space from Earth in a carefully delimited zone a hundred light-years in diameter. Only when that sphere has been settled are we to go farther, not because there are any technical difficulties in sending our carrier ships a thousand light-years out, or ten thousand, but because the Master has felt from the start that we must assimilate our first immense wave of outward movement, must pause and come to an understanding of what it is like to have created a galactic empire on so vast a scale, before we attempt to go onward into the infinity that awaits us. Otherwise, I say, we risk falling victim to a megalomaniacal centrifugal dizziness from which we may never recover. And so Darklaw forbids journeys beyond the boundary.

They watch me stonily throughout my recital of these overfamiliar concepts, saying nothing.

I go on to tell them that Earth now is receiving indications that voyages far beyond the hundred-light-year limit have taken place.

Their faces are expressionless.

"What is that to us?" the voivode asks.

"One of the deviant tracks begins here," I say.

"Our Anglic is very poor. Perhaps you can say that another way."

"When the first ship brought the Velde receiver to Zima, it built replicas of itself and of the receiver, and sent them onward to other stars farther from Earth. We've traced the various trajectories that lead beyond the Mission boundaries, and one of them comes out of a world that re-

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ceived its Velde equipment from a world that got its equipment from here. A granddaughter world, so to speak."

"This has nothing to do with us, nothing at all," the voivode says coolly.

"Zima is only my starting point," I say. "It may be that you are in contact with these outer worlds, that I can get some clue from you about who is making these voyages, and why, and where he's setting out from."

"We have no knowledge of any of this."

I point out, trying not to do it in any overbearing way, that by the authority of Darklaw vested in me as a Plenipotentiary of the Order he is required to assist me in my inquiry. But there is no way to brandish the authority of Darklaw that is not overbearing, and I see the voivode stiffen at once, I see his face grow black, I see very clearly that he regards himself as autonomous and his world as independent of Earth.

That comes as no surprise to me. We were not so naïve, so innocent of historical precedent, as to think we could maintain control over the colonies. What we wanted was quite the opposite, new Earths free of our grasp—cut off, indeed, by an inflexible law forbidding all contact between mother world and colony once the colony has been established—and free, likewise, of the compulsion to replicate the tragic mistakes that the old Earth had made. But because we had felt the hand of God guiding us in every way as we led mankind forth into the Dark, we believed that God's law as we understood it would never be repudiated by those whom we had given the stars. Now, seeing evidence that His law is subordinate out here to the will of wilful men, I fear for the structure that we have devoted our lives to building.

"If this is why you really have come," the voivode says, "then you have wasted your time. But perhaps I misunderstand everything you say. My Anglic is not good. We must talk again." He gestures to the boyars and says something in Russkiye that is unmistakably a dismissal. They take me away and give me a room in some sort of dreary lodging-house overlooking the plaza at the center of town. When they leave, they lock the door behind them. I am a prisoner.

It is a harsh land. In the first few days of my internment there is a snowstorm every afternoon. First the sky turns metal-gray, and then black. Then hard little pellets of snow, driven by the rising wind, strike the window. Then it comes down in heavy fluffy flakes for several hours. Afterwards machines scuttle out and clear the pathways. I have never before been in a place where they have snow. It seems quite beautiful to me, a kind of benediction, a cleansing cover.

This is a very small town, and there is wilderness all around it. On the second day and again on the third, packs of wild beasts go racing through the central plaza. They look something like huge dogs, but they

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have very long legs, almost like those of horses, and their tails are tipped with three pairs of ugly-looking spikes. They move through the town like a whirlwind, prowling in the trash, butting their heads against the closed doors, and everyone gets quickly out of their way.

Later on the third day there is an execution in the plaza, practically below my window. A jowly, heavily bearded man clad in furs is led forth, strapped to a post, and shot by five men in uniforms. For all I can tell, he is one of the three boyars who took me to the voivode on my first day. I have never seen anyone killed before, and the whole event has such a strange, dreamlike quality for me that the shock and horror and revulsion do not strike me until perhaps half an hour later.

It is hard for me to say which I find the most alien, the snowstorms, the packs of fierce beasts running through the town, or the execution.

My food is shoved through a slot in the door. It is rough, simple stuff, stews and soups and a kind of gritty bread. That is all right. Not until the fourth day does anyone come to see me. My first visitor is Marfa Ivanovna, who says, "They think you're a spy. I told you to tell them the truth."

"I did."

"Are you a spy?"

"You know that I'm not."

"Yes," she says. "I know. But the voivode is troubled. He thinks you mean to overthrow him."

"All I want is for him to give me some information. Then I'll be gone from here and won't ever return."

"He is a very suspicious man."

"Let him come here and pray with me, and see what my nature is like. All I am is a servant of God. Which I hope is true of the voivode as well."

"He is thinking of having you shot," Marfa Ivanovna says.

"Let him come to me and pray with me," I tell her.

The voivode comes to me, not once but three times. We do no praying—in truth, any mention of God, or Darklaw, or even the Mission, seems to make him uncomfortable—but gradually we begin to understand each other. We are not that different. He is a hard, dedicated, cautious man governing a harsh troublesome land. I have been called hard and dedicated and cautious myself. My nature is not as suspicious as his, but I have not had to contend with snowstorms and wild beasts and the other hazards of this place. Nor am I Russian. They seem to be suspicious from birth, these Russians. And they have lived apart from Earth a long while. That too is Darklaw: we would not have the new worlds contaminated with our plagues of the spirit or of the flesh, nor

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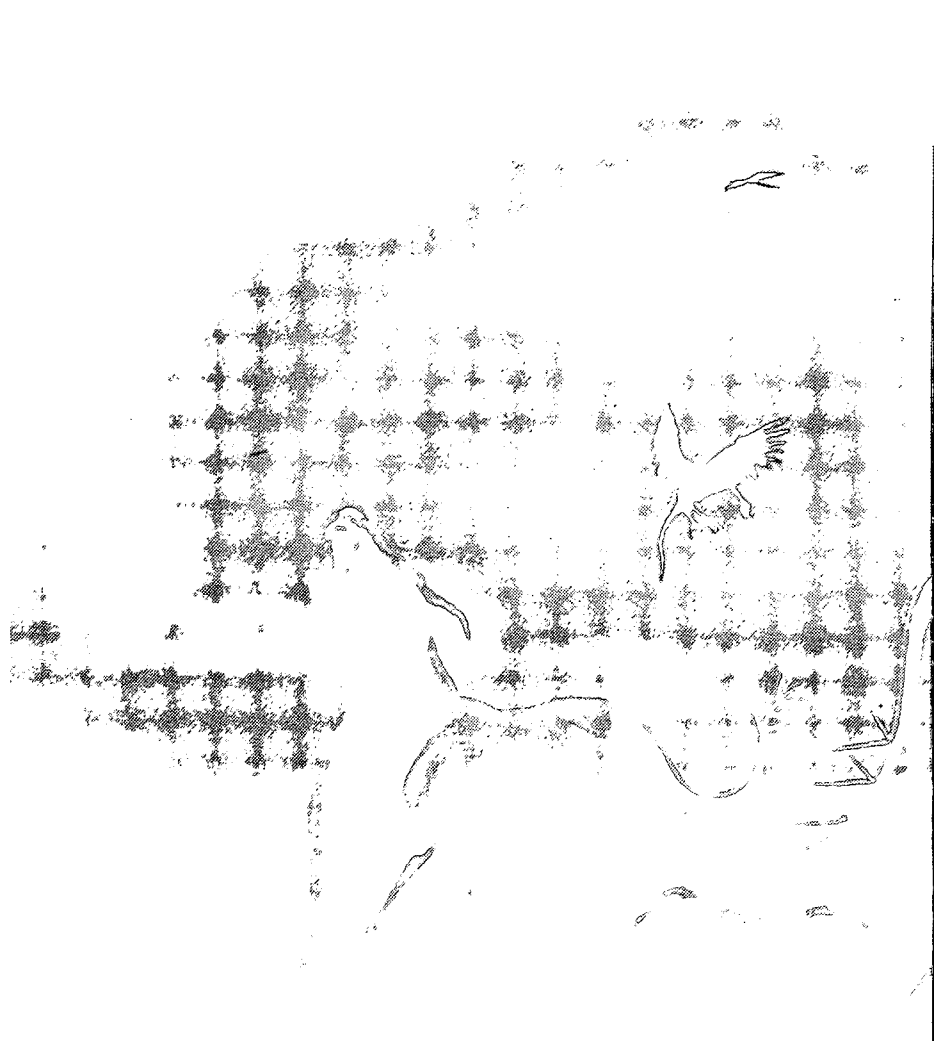

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do we want alien plagues of either kind carried back from them to us. We have enough of our own already.

I am not going to be shot. He makes that clear. "We talked of it, yes. But it would be wrong."

"The man who was? What did he do?"

"He took that which was not his," says the voivode, and shrugs. "He was worse than a beast. He could not be allowed to live among us."

Nothing is said of when I will be released. I am left alone for two more days. The coarse dull food begins to oppress me, and the solitude. There is another snowstorm, worse than the last. From my window I see ungainly birds something like vultures, with long naked yellow necks and drooping reptilian tails, circling in the sky. Finally the voivode comes a second time, and simply stares at me as though expecting me to blurt out some confession. I look at him in puzzlement, and after long silence he laughs explosively and summons an aide, who brings in a bottle of a clear fiery liquor. Two or three quick gulps and he becomes expansive, and tells me of his childhood. His father was voivode before him, long ago, and was killed by a wild animal while out hunting. I try to imagine a world that still has dangerous animals roaming freely. To me it is like a world where the gods of primitive man are real and alive, and go disguised among mortals, striking out at them randomly and without warning.

Then he asks me about myself, wanting to know how old I was when I became a priest of the Order, and whether I was as religious as a boy as I am now. I tell him what I can, within the limits placed on me by my vows. Perhaps I go a little beyond the limits, even. I explain about my early interest in technical matters, my entering the Order at seventeen, my life of service.

The part about my religious vocation seems odd to him. He appears to think I must have undergone some sudden conversion midway through my adolescence. "There has never been a time when God has not been present at my side," I say.

"How very lucky you are," he says.

"Lucky?"

He touches his glass to mine.

"Your health," he says. We drink. Then he says, "What does your Order really want with us, anyway?"

"With you? We want nothing with you. Three generations ago we gave you your world; everything after that is up to you."

"No. You want to dictate how we shall live. You are people of the past, and we are people of the future, and you are unable to understand our souls."

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"Not so," I tell him. "Why do you think we want to dictate to you? Have we interfered with you up till now?"

"You are here now, though."

"Not to interfere. Only to gain information."

"Ah. Is this so?" He laughs and drinks. "Your health," he says again.

He comes a third time a couple of days later. I am restless and irritable when he enters; I have had enough of this imprisonment, these groundless suspicions, this bleak and frosty world; I am ready to be on my way. It is all I can do to keep from bluntly demanding my freedom. As it is I am uncharacteristically sharp and surly with him, answering in quick snarling monosyllables when he asks me how I have slept, whether I am well, is my room warm enough. He gives me a look of surprise, and then one of thoughtful appraisal, and then he smiles. He is in complete control, and we both know it.

"Tell me once more," he says, "why you have come to us."

I calm myself and run through the whole thing one more time. He nods. Now that he knows me better, he tells me, he begins to think that I may be sincere, that I have not come to spy, that I actually would be willing to chase across the galaxy this way in pursuit of an ideal. And so on in that vein for a time, both patronizing and genuinely friendly almost in the same breath.

Then he says, "We have decided that it is best to send you onward."

"Where?"

"The name of the world is Entrada. It is one of our daughter worlds, eleven light-years away, a very hot place. We trade our precious metals for their spices. Someone came from there not long ago and told us of a strange man named Oesterreich, who passed through Entrada and spoke of undertaking journeys to new and distant places. Perhaps he can provide you with the answers that you seek. If you can find him."

"Oesterreich?"

"That is the name, yes."

"Can you tell me any more about him than that?"

"What I have told you is all that I know."

He stares at me truculently, as if defying me to show that he is lying. But I believe him.

"Even for that much assistance, I am grateful," I say.

"Yes. Never let it be said that we have failed to offer aid to the Order." He smiles again. "But if you ever come to this world again, you understand, we will know that you were a spy after all. And we will treat you accordingly."

Marfa Ivanovna is in charge of the Velde equipment. She positions me within the transmitting doorway, moving me about this way and that

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to be certain that I will be squarely within the field. When she is satisfied, she says, "You know, you ought not ever come back this way."

"I understand that."

"You must be a very virtuous man. Ilya Alexandrovich came very close to putting you to death, and then he changed his mind. This I know for certain. But he remains suspicious of you. He is suspicious of everything the Order does."

"The Order has never done anything to injure him or anyone else on this planet, and never will."

"That may be so," says Marfa Ivanovna. "But still, you are lucky to be leaving here alive. You should not come back. And you should tell others of your sort to stay away from Zima too. We do not accept the Order here."

I am still pondering the implications of that astonishing statement when she does something even more astonishing. Stepping into the cubicle with me, she suddenly opens her fur-trimmed jacket, revealing full round breasts, very pale, dusted with the same light red freckles that she has on her face. She seizes me by the hair and presses my head against her breasts, and holds it there a long moment. Her skin is very warm. It seems almost feverish.

"For luck," she says, and steps back. Her eyes are sad and strange. It could almost be a loving look, or perhaps a pitying one, or both. Then she turns away from me and throws the switch.

Entrada is torrid and moist, a humid sweltering hothouse of a place so much the antithesis of Zima that my body rebels immediately against the shift from one world to the other. Coming forth into it, I feel the heat rolling toward me like an implacable wall of water. It sweeps up and over me and smashes me to my knees. I am sick and numb with displacement and dislocation. It seems impossible for me to draw a breath. The thick, shimmering, golden-green atmosphere here is almost liquid; it crams itself into my throat, it squeezes my lungs in an agonizing grip. Through blurring eyes I see a tight green web of jungle foliage rising before me, a jumbled vista of corrugated-tin shacks, a patch of sky the color of shallow sea-water, and, high above, a merciless, throbbing, weirdly elongated sun shaped like no sun I have ever imagined. Then I sway and fall forward and see nothing more.

I lie suspended in delirium a long while. It is a pleasing restful time, like being in the womb. I am becalmed in a great stillness, lulled by soft voices and sweet music. But gradually consciousness begins to break through. I swim upward toward the light that glows somewhere above me, and my eyes open, and I see a serene friendly face, and a voice says, "It's nothing to worry about. Everyone who comes here the way you did

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has a touch of it, the first time. At your age I suppose it's worse than usual."

Dazedly I realize that I am in mid-conversation.

"A touch of what?" I ask.

The other, who is a slender gray-eyed woman of middle years wearing a sort of Indian sari, smiles and says, "Of the Falling. It's a lambda effect. But I'm sorry. We've been talking for a while, and I thought you were awake. Evidently you weren't."

"I am now," I tell her. "But I don't think I've been for very long."

Nodding, she says, "Let's start over. You're in Traveler's Hospice. The humidity got you, and the heat, and the lightness of the gravity. You're all right now."

"Yes."

"Do you think you can stand?"

"I can try," I say.

She helps me up. I feel so giddy that I expect to float away. Carefully she guides me toward the window of my room. Outside I see a veranda and a close-cropped lawn. Just beyond, a dark curtain of dense bush closes everything off. The intense light makes everything seem very near; it is as if I could put my hand out the window and thrust it into the heart of that exuberant jungle.

"So bright—the sun—" I whisper.

In fact there are two whitish suns in the sky, so close to each other that their photospheres overlap and each is distended by the other's gravitational pull, making them nearly oval in shape. Together they seem to form a single egg-shaped mass, though even the one quick dazzled glance I can allow myself tells me that this is really a binary system, discrete bundles of energy forever locked together.

Awed and amazed, I touch my fingertips to my cheek in wonder, and feel a thick coarse beard there that I had not had before.

The woman says, "Two suns, actually. Their centers are only about a million and a half kilometers apart, and they revolve around each other every seven and a half hours. We're the fourth planet out, but we're as far from them as Neptune is from the Sun."

But I have lost interest for the moment in astronomical matters. I rub my face, exploring its strange new shagginess. The beard covers my cheeks, my jaws, much of my throat.

"How long have I been unconscious?" I ask.

"About three weeks."

"Your weeks or Earth weeks?"

"We use Earth weeks here."

"And that was just a light case? Does everybody who gets the Falling spend three weeks being delirious?"

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"Sometimes much more. Sometimes they never come out of it."

I stare at her. "And it's just the heat, the humidity, the lightness of the gravity? They can knock you down the moment you step out of the transmitter and put you under for weeks? I would think it should take something like a stroke to do that."

"It *is* something like a stroke," she says. "Did you think that traveling between stars is like stepping across the street? You come from a low-lambda world to a high-lambda one without doing your adaptation drills and of course the change is going to knock you flat right away. What did you expect?"

High-lambda? Low-lambda?

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

"Didn't they tell you on Zima about the adaptation drills before they shipped you here?"

"Not a thing."

"Or about lambda differentials?"

"Nothing," I say.

Her face grows very solemn. "Pigs, that's all they are. They should have prepared you for the jump. But I guess they didn't care whether you lived or died."

I think of Marfa Ivanovna, wishing me luck as she reached for the switch. I think of that strange sad look in her eyes. I think of the voivode Ilya Alexandrovich, who might have had me shot but decided instead to offer me a free trip off his world, a one-way trip. There is much that I am only now beginning to understand, I see, about this empire that Earth is building in what we call the Dark. We are building it in the dark, yes, in more ways than one.

"No," I say. "I guess they didn't care."

They are friendlier on Entrada, no question of that. Interstellar trade is important here and visitors from other worlds are far more common than they are on wintry Zima. Apparently I am free to live at the hospice as long as I wish. The weeks of my stay have stretched now into months, and no one suggests that it is time for me to be moving along.

I had not expected to stay here so long. But gathering the information I need has been a slow business, with many a maddening detour and delay.

At least I experience no further lambda problems. Lambda, they tell me, is a planetary force that became known only when Velde jumps between solar systems began. There are high-lambda worlds and low-lambda worlds, and anyone going from one kind to the other without proper preparation is apt to undergo severe stress. It is all news to me. I wonder if the Order on Earth is aware at all of these difficulties. But

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perhaps they feel that matters which may arise during journeys *between* worlds of the Dark are of no concern to us of the mother world.

They have taken me through the adaptation drills here at the hospice somehow while I was still unconscious, and I am more or less capable now of handling Entradan conditions. The perpetual steambath heat, which no amount of air conditioning seems really to mitigate, is hard to cope with, and the odd combination of heavy atmosphere and light gravity puts me at risk of nausea with every breath, though after a time I get the knack of pulling shallow nips of air. There are allergens borne on every breeze, too, pollen of a thousand kinds and some free-floating alkaloids, against which I need daily medication. My face turns red under the force of the double sun, and the skin of my cheeks gets strangely soft, which makes my new beard an annoyance. I rid myself of it. My hair acquires an unfamiliar silver sheen, not displeasing, but unexpected. All this considered, though, I can manage here.

Entrada has a dozen major settlements and several hundred thousand people. It is a big world, metal-poor and light, on which a dozen small continents and some intricate archipelagoes float in huge warm seas. The whole planet is tropical, even at the poles: distant though it is from its suns, it would probably be inhospitable to human life if it were very much closer. The soil of Entrada has the lunatic fertility that we associate with the tropics, and agriculture is the prime occupation here. The people, drawn from many regions of Earth, are attractive and outgoing, with an appealingly easy manner.

It appears that they have not drifted as far from Darklaw here as the Zimans have.

Certainly the Order is respected. There are chapels everywhere and the people use them. Whenever I enter one there is a little stir of excitement, for it is generally known that I was Lord Magistrate of the Senders during my time on Earth, and that makes me a celebrity, or a curiosity, or both. Many of the Entradans are Earthborn themselves —emigration to this world was still going on as recently as eight or ten years ago—and the sight of my medallion inspires respect and even awe in them. I do not wear my robe of office, not in this heat. Probably I will never wear it again, no matter what climate I find myself in when I leave here. Someone else is Lord Magistrate of the House of Senders now, after all. But the medallion alone is enough to win me a distinction here that I surely never had on Zima.

I think, though, that they pick and choose among the tenets of Darklaw to their own satisfaction on Entrada, obeying those which suit them and casting aside anything that seems too constricting. I am not sure of this, but it seems likely. To discuss such matters with anyone I have come to know here is, of course, impossible. The people I have managed to get

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to know so far, at the hospice, at the chapel house in town, at the tavern where I have begun to take my meals, are pleasant and sociable. But they become uneasy, even evasive, whenever I speak of any aspect of Earth's emigration into space. Let me mention the Order, or the Master, or anything at all concerning the Mission, and they begin to moisten their lips and look uncomfortable. Clearly things are happening out here, things never envisioned by the founders of the Order, and they are unwilling to talk about them with anyone who himself wears the high medallion.

It is a measure of the changes that have come over me since I began this journey that I am neither surprised nor dismayed by this.

Why should we have believed that we could prescribe a single code of law that would meet the needs of hundreds of widely varying worlds? Of course they would modify our teachings to fit their own evolving cultures, and some would probably depart entirely from that which we had created for them. It was only to be expected. Many things have become clear to me on this journey that I did not see before, that, indeed, I did not so much as pause to consider. But much else remains mysterious. .

I am at the busy waterfront esplanade, leaning over the rail, staring out toward Volcano Isle, a dim gray peak far out to sea. It is mid-morning, before the full heat of noon has descended. I have been here long enough so that I think of this as the cool time of the day.

"Your grace?" a voice calls. "Lord Magistrate?"

No one calls me those things here.

I glance down to my left. A dark-haired man in worn seaman's clothes and a braided captain's hat is looking up at me out of a rowboat just below the sea-wall. He is smiling and waving. I have no idea who he is, but he plainly wants to talk with me, and anything that helps me break the barrier that stands between me and real knowledge of this place is to be encouraged.

He points to the far end of the harbor, where there is a ramp leading from the little beach to the esplanade, and tells me in pantomime that he means to tie up his boat and go ashore. I wait for him at the head of the ramp, and after a few moments he comes trudging up to greet me. He is perhaps fifty years old, trim and sun-bronzed, with a lean weatherbeaten face.

"You don't remember me," he says.

"I'm afraid not."

"You personally interviewed me and approved my application to emigrate, eighteen years ago. Sandys. Lloyd Sandys." He smiles hopefully, as though his name alone will open the floodgates of my memory.

When I was Lord Magistrate I reviewed five hundred emigrant dossiers

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a week, and interviewed ten or fifteen applicants a day myself, and forgot each one the moment I approved or rejected them. But for this man the interview with the Lord Magistrate of the Senders was the most significant moment of his life.

"Sorry," I say. "So many names, so many faces—"

"I would have recognized you even if I hadn't already heard you were here. After all these years, you've hardly changed at all, your grace." He grins. "So now you've come to settle on Entrada yourself?"

"Only a short visit."

"Ah." He is visibly disappointed. "You ought to think of staying. It's a wonderful place, if you don't mind a little heat. I haven't regretted coming here for a minute."

He takes me to a seaside tavern where he is obviously well known, and orders lunch for both of us: skewers of small corkscrew-shaped creatures that look and taste a little like squid, and a flask of a strange but likable emerald-colored wine with a heavy, musky, spicy flavor. He tells me that he has four sturdy sons and four strapping daughters, and that he and his wife run a harbor ferry, short hops to the surrounding islands of this archipelago, which is Entrada's main population center. There still are traces of Melbourne in his accent. He seems very happy. "You'll let me take you on a tour, won't you?" he asks. "We've got some very beautiful islands out there, and you can't get to see them by Velde jumps."

I protest that I don't want to take him away from his work, but he shrugs that off. Work can always wait, he says. There's no hurry, on a world where anyone can dip his net in the sea and come up with a good meal. We have another flask of wine. He seems open, genial, trustworthy. Over cheese and fruit he asks me why I've come here.

I hesitate.

"A fact-finding mission," I say.

"Ah. Is that really so? Can I be of any help, d'ye think?"

It is several more winy lunches, and a little boat-trip to some nearby islands fragrant with masses of intoxicating purple blooms, before I am willing to begin taking Sandys into my confidence. I tell him that the Order has sent me into the Dark to study and report on the ways of life that are evolving on the new worlds. He seems untroubled by that, though Ilya Alexandrovich might have had me shot for such an admission.

Later, I tell him about the apparent deviations from the planned scope of the Mission that are the immediate reason for my journey.

"You mean, going out beyond the hundred-light-year zone?"

"Yes."

"That's pretty amazing, that anyone would go there."

"We have indications that it's happening."

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"Really," he says.

"And on Zima," I continue, "I picked up a story that somebody here on Entrada has been preaching ventures into the far Dark. You don't know anything about that, do you?"

His only overt reaction is a light frown, quickly erased. Perhaps he has nothing to tell me. Or else we have reached the point, perhaps, beyond which he is unwilling to speak.

But some hours later he revives the topic himself. We are on our way back to harbor, sunburned and a little tipsy from an outing to one of the prettiest of the local islands, when he suddenly says, "I remember hearing something about that preacher you mentioned before."

I wait, not saying anything.

"My wife told me about him. There was somebody going around talking about far voyages, she said." New color comes to his face, a deep red beneath the bronze. "I must have forgotten about it when we were talking before." In fact he must know that I think him disingenuous for withholding this from me all afternoon. But I make no attempt to call him on that. We are still testing each other.

I ask him if he can get more information for me, and he promises to discuss it with his wife. Then he is absent for a week, making a circuit of the outer rim of the archipelago to deliver freight. When he returns, finally, he brings with him an unusual golden brandy from one of the remote islands as a gift for me, but my cautious attempt to revive our earlier conversation runs into a familiar sort of Entradan evasiveness. It is almost as though he doesn't know what I'm referring to.

At length I say bluntly, "Have you had a chance to talk to your wife about that preacher?"

He looks troubled. "In fact, it slipped my mind."

"Ah."

"Tonight, maybe—"

"I understand that the man's name is Oesterreich," I say.

His eyes go wide.

"You know that, do you?"

"Help me, will you, Sandys? I'm the one who sent you to this place, remember? Your whole life here wouldn't exist but for me."

"That's true. That's very true."

"Who's Oesterreich?"

"I never knew him. I never had any dealings with him."

"Tell me what you know about him."

"A crazy man, he was."

"Was?"

"He's not here any more."

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I uncork the bottle of rare brandy, pour a little for myself, a more generous shot for Sandys.

"Where'd he go?" I ask.

He sips, reflectively. After a time he says, "I don't know, your grace. That's God's own truth. I haven't seen or heard of him in a couple of years. He chartered one of the other captains here, a man named Feraud, to take him to one of the islands, and that's the last I know."

"Which island?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think Feraud remembers?"

"I could ask him," Sandys says.

"Yes. Ask him. Would you do that?"

"I could ask him, yes," he says.

So it goes, slowly. Sandys confers with his friend Feraud, who hesitates and evades, or so Sandys tells me; but eventually Feraud finds it in him to recall that he had taken Oesterreich to Volcano Isle, three hours' journey to the west. Sandys admits to me, now that he is too deep in to hold back, that he himself actually heard Oesterreich speak several times, that Oesterreich claimed to be in possession of some secret way of reaching worlds immensely remote from the settled part of the Dark.

"And do you believe that?"

"I don't know. He seemed crazy to me."

"Crazy how?"

"The look in his eye. The things he said. That it's our destiny to reach the rim of the universe. That the Order holds us back out of its own timidity. That we must follow the Goddess Avatar, who beckons us onward to—"

"Who?"

His face flushes bright crimson. "The Goddess Avatar. I don't know what she is, your grace. Honestly. It's some cult he's running, some new religion he's made up. I told you he's crazy. I've never believed any of this."

There is a pounding in my temples, and a fierce ache behind my eyes. My throat has gone dry and not even Sandys' brandy can soothe it.

"Where do you think Oesterreich is now?"

"I don't know." His eyes are tormented. "Honestly. Honestly. I think he's gone from Entrada."

"Is there a Velde transmitter station on Volcano Isle?"

He thinks for a moment. "Yes. Yes, there is."

"Will you do me one more favor?" I ask. "One thing, and then I won't ask any more."

"Yes?"

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"Take a ride over to Volcano Isle tomorrow. Talk with the people who run the Velde station there. See if you can find out where they sent Oesterreich."

"They'll never tell me anything like that."

I put five shining coins in front of him, each one worth as much as he can make in a month's ferrying.

"Use these," I say. "If you come back with the answer, there are five more for you."

"Come with me, your grace. You speak to them."

"No."

"You ought to see Volcano Isle. It's a fantastic place. The center of it blew out thousands of years ago, and people live up on the rim, around a lagoon so deep nobody's been able to find the bottom. I was meaning to take you there anyway, and—"

"You go," I say. "Just you."

After a moment he pockets the coins. In the morning I watch him go off in one of his boats, a small hydrofoil skiff. There is no word from him for two days, and then he comes to me at the hospice, looking tense and unshaven.

"It wasn't easy," he says.

"You found out where he went?"

"Yes."

"Go on," I urge, but he is silent, lips working but nothing coming out. I produce five more of the coins and lay them before him. He ignores them. This is some interior struggle.

He says, after a time, "We aren't supposed to reveal anything about anything of this. I told you what I've already told you because I owe you. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"You mustn't ever let anyone know who gave you the information."

"Don't worry," I say.

He studies me for a time. Then he says, "The name of the planet where Oesterreich went is Eden. It's a seventeen-light-year hop. You won't need lambda adjustment, coming from here. There's hardly any differential. All right, your grace? That's what all I can tell you." He stares at the coins and shakes his head. Then he runs out of the room, leaving them behind.

Eden turns out to be no Eden at all. I see a spongy, marshy landscape, a gray sodden sky, a raw, half-built town. There seem to be two suns, a faint yellow-white one and a larger reddish one. A closer look reveals that the system here is like the Lalande one: the reddish one is not really a star but a glowing substellar mass about the size of Jupiter. Eden is

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one of its moons. What we like to speak of in the Order as the new Earths of the Dark are in fact scarcely Earthlike at all, I am coming to realize: all they have in common with the mother world is a tolerably breathable atmosphere and a manageable gravitational pull. How can we speak of a world as an Earth when its sun is not yellow but white or red or green, or there are two or three or even four suns in the sky all day and all night, or the primary source of warmth is not even a sun but a giant planet-like ball of hot gas?

"Settler?" they ask me, when I arrive on Eden.

"Traveler," I reply. "Short-term visit."

They scarcely seem to care. This is a difficult world and they have no time for bureaucratic formalities. So long as I have money, and I do—at least these strange daughter worlds of ours still honor our currency—I am, if not exactly welcome, then at least permitted.

Do they observe Darklaw here? When I arrive I am wearing neither my robe of office nor my medallion, and it seems just as well. The Order appears not to be in favor, this far out. I can find no sign of our chapels or other indications of submission to our rule. What I do find, as I wander the rough streets of this jerry-rigged town on this cool, rainswept world, is a chapel of some other kind, a white geodesic dome with a mysterious symbol—three superimposed six-pointed stars—painted in black on its door.

"Goddess save you," a woman coming out says brusquely to me, and shoulders past me in the rain.

They are not even bothering to hide things, this far out on the frontier.

I go inside. The walls are white and an odd, disturbing mural is painted on one of them. It shows what seems to be a windowless ruined temple drifting in blue starry space, with all manner of objects and creatures floating near it, owls, skulls, snakes, masks, golden cups, bodiless heads. It is like a scene viewed in a dream. The temple's alabaster walls are covered with hieroglyphics. A passageway leads inward and inward and inward, and at its end I can see a tiny view of an eerie landscape like a plateau at the end of time.

There are half a dozen people in the room, each facing in a different direction, reading aloud in low murmurs. A slender dark-skinned man looks up at me and says, "Goddess save you, father. How does your journey go?"

"I'm trying to find Oesterreich. They said he's here."

A couple of the other readers look up. A woman with straw-colored hair says, "He's gone Goddessward."

"I'm sorry. I don't under—"

Another woman, whose features are tiny and delicately modeled in the center of a face vast as the map of Russia, breaks in to tell me, "He was

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going to stop off on Phosphor first. You may be able to catch up with him there. Goddess save you, father."

I stare at her, at the mural of the mural of the stone temple, at the other woman.

"Thank you," I say. "Goddess save you," my voice adds.

I buy passage to Phosphor. It is sixty-seven light-years from Earth. The necessary lambda adjustment costs nearly as much as the transit fee itself, and I must spend three days going through the adaptation process before I can leave.

Then, Goddess save me, I am ready to set out from Eden for whatever greater strangeness awaits me beyond.

As I wait for the Simtow reaction to annihilate me and reconstruct me in some unknown place, I think of all those who passed through my House over the years as I selected the outbound colonists—and how I and the Lord Magistrates before me had clung to the fantasy that we were shaping perfect new Earths out there in the Dark, that we were composing exquisite symphonies of human nature, filtering out all of the discordances that had marred all our history up till now. Without ever going to the new worlds ourselves to view the results of our work, of course, because to go would mean to cut ourselves off forever, by Darklaw's own constricting terms, from our House, from our task, from Earth itself. And now, catapulted into the Dark in a moment's convulsive turn, by shame and guilt and the need to try to repair that which I had evidently made breakable instead of imperishable, I am learning that I have been wrong all along, that the symphonies of human nature that I had composed were built out of the same old tunes, that people will do what they will do unconstrained by abstract regulations laid down for them *a priori* by others far away. The tight filter of which the House of Senders is so proud is no filter at all. We send our finest ones to the stars and they turn their backs on us at once. And, pondering these things, it seems to me that my soul is pounding at the gates of my mind, that madness is pressing close against the walls of my spirit—a thing which I have always dreaded, the thing which brought me to the cloisters of the Order in the first place.

Black light flashes in my eyes and once more I go leaping through the Dark.

"He isn't here," they tell me on Phosphor. There is a huge cool red sun here, and a hot blue one a couple of hundred solar units away, close enough to blaze like a brilliant beacon in the day sky. "He's gone on to Entropy. Goddess save you."

"Goddess save you," I say.

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There are triple-triangle signs on every doorfront in Phosphor's single city. The city's name is Jerusalem. To name cities or worlds for places on Earth is forbidden. But I know that I have left Darklaw far behind here.

Entropy, they say, is ninety-one light-years from Earth. I am approaching the limits of the sphere of settlement.

Oesterreich has a soft, insinuating voice. He says, "You should come with me. I really would like to take a Lord Magistrate along when I go to her."

"I'm no longer a Lord Magistrate."

"You can't ever stop being a Lord Magistrate. Do you think you can take the Order off just by putting your medallion in your suitcase?"

"Who is she, this Goddess Avatar everybody talks about?"

Oesterreich laughs. "Come with me and you'll find out."

He is a small man, very lean, with broad, looming shoulders that make him appear much taller than he is when he is sitting down. Maybe he is forty years old, maybe much older. His face is paper-white, with perpetual bluish stubble, and his eyes have a black troublesome gleam that strikes me as a mark either of extraordinary intelligence or of pervasive insanity, or perhaps both at once. It was not difficult at all for me to find him, only hours after my arrival on Entropy. The planet has a single village, a thousand settlers. The air is mild here, the sun yellow-green. Three huge moons hang just overhead in the daytime sky, as though dangling on a clothesline.

I say, "Is she real, this goddess of yours?"

"Oh, she's real, all right. As real as you or me."

"Someone we can walk up to and speak with?"

"Her name used to be Margaret Benevente. She was born in Geneva. She emigrated to a world called Three Suns about thirty years ago."

"And now she's a goddess."

"No. I never said that."

"What is she, then?"

"She's the Goddess Avatar."

"Which means what?"

He smiles. "Which means she's a holy woman in whom certain fundamental principles of the universe have been incarnated. You want to know any more than that, you come with me, eh? Your grace."

"And where is she?"

"She's on an uninhabited planet about five thousand lightyears from here right now."

I am dealing with a lunatic, I tell myself. That gleam is the gleam of madness, yes.

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"You don't believe that, do you?" he asks.

"How can it be possible?"

"Come with me and you'll find out."

"Five thousand light-years—" I shake my head. "No. No."

He shrugs. "So don't go, then."

There is a terrible silence in the little room. I feel impaled on it. Thunder crashes outside, finally, breaking the tension. Lightning has been playing across the sky constantly since my arrival, but there has been no rain.

"Faster-than-light travel is impossible," I say inanely. "Except by way of Velde transmission. You know that. If we've got Velde equipment five thousand light-years from here, we would have had to start shipping it out around the time the Pyramids were being built in Egypt."

"What makes you think we get there with Velde equipment?" Oesterreich asks me.

He will not explain. Follow me and you'll see, he tells me. Follow me and you'll see.

The curious thing is that I like him. He is not exactly a likable man—too intense, too tightly wound, the fanaticism carried much too close to the surface—but he has a sort of charm all the same. He travels from world to world, he tells me, bringing the new gospel of the Goddess Avatar. That is exactly how he says it, "the new gospel of the Goddess Avatar," and I feel a chill when I hear the phrase. It seems absurd and frightening both at once. Yet I suppose those who brought the Order to the world a hundred fifty years ago must have seemed just as strange and just as preposterous to those who first heard our words.

Of course, we had the Velde equipment to support our philosophies.

But these people have—what? The strength of insanity? The clear cool purposefulness that comes from having put reality completely behind them?

"You were in the Order once, weren't you?" I ask him.

"You know it, your grace."

"Which House?"

"The Mission," he says.

"I should have guessed that. And now you have a new mission, is that it?"

"An extension of the old one. Mohammed, you know, didn't see Islam as a contradiction of Judaism and Christianity. Just as the next level of revelation, incorporating the previous ones."

"So you would incorporate the Order into your new belief?"

"We would never repudiate the Order, your grace."

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"And Darklaw? How widely is that observed, would you say, in the colony worlds?"

"I think we've kept much of it," Oesterreich says. "Certainly we keep the part about not trying to return to Earth. And the part about spreading the Mission outward."

"Beyond the boundaries decreed, it would seem."

"This is a new dispensation," he says.

"But not a repudiation of the original teachings?"

"Oh, no," he says, and smiles. "Not a repudiation at all, your grace."

He has that passionate confidence, that unshakable assurance, that is the mark of the real prophet and also of the true madman. There is something diabolical about him, and irresistible. In these conversations with him I have so far managed to remain outwardly calm, even genial, but the fact is that I am quaking within. I really do believe he is insane. Either that or an utter fraud, a cynical salesman of the irrational and the unreal, and though he is flippant he does not seem at all cynical. A madman, then. Is his condition infectious? As I have said, the fear of madness has been with me all my life; and so my harsh discipline, my fierce commitment, my depth of belief. He threatens all my defenses.

"When do you set out to visit your Goddess Avatar?" I ask.

"Whenever you like, your grace."

"You really think I'm going with you?"

"Of course you are. How else can you find out what you came out here to learn?"

"I've learned that the colonies have fallen away from Darklaw. Isn't that enough?"

"But you think we've all gone crazy, right?"

"When did I say that?"

"You didn't need to say it."

"If I send word to Earth of what's happened, and the Order chooses to cut off all further technical assistance and all shipments of manufactured goods—?"

"They won't do that. But even if they do—well, we're pretty much self-sufficient out here now, and getting more so every year—"

"And further emigration from Earth?"

"That would be your loss, not ours, your grace. Earth needs the colonies as a safety valve for her population surplus. We can get along without more emigrants. We know how to reproduce, out here." He grins at me. "This is foolish talk. You've come this far. Now go the rest of the way with me."

I am silent.

"Well?"

"Now, you mean?"

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"Right now."

There is only one Velde station on Entropy, about three hundred meters from the house where I have been talking with Oesterreich. We go to it under a sky berserk with green lightning. He seems not even to notice

"Don't we have to do lambda drills?" I ask.

"Not for this hop," Oesterreich says. "There's no differential between here and there." He is busy setting up coordinates. "Get into the chamber, your grace."

"And have you send me God knows where by myself?"

"Don't be foolish. Please."

It may be the craziest thing I have ever done. But I am the servant of the Order; and the Order has asked this of me. I step into the chamber. No one else is with us. He continues to press keys, and I realize that he is setting up an automatic transfer, requiring no external operator. When he is done with that he joins me, and there is the moment of flash.

We emerge into a cool, dry world with an Earthlike sun, a sea-green sky, a barren, rocky landscape. Ahead of us stretches an empty plateau broken here and there by small granite hillocks that rise like humped islands out of the flatness.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Fifty light-years from Entropy, and about eighty-five light-years from Earth."

"What's the name of this place?"

"It doesn't have one. Nobody lives here. Come, now we walk a little."

We start forward. The ground has the look that comes of not having felt rain for ten or twenty years, but tough little tussocks of a grayish jagged-looking grass are pushing up somehow through the hard, stony red soil. When we have gone a hundred meters or so the land begins to drop away sharply on my left, so that I can look down into a broad, flat valley about three hundred meters below us. A solitary huge beast, somewhat like an elephant in bulk and manner, is grazing quietly down there, patiently prodding at the ground with its rigid two-pronged snout.

"Here we are," Oesterreich says.

We have reached the nearest of the little granite islands. When we walk around it, I see that its face on the farther side is fissured and broken, creating a sort of cave. Oesterreich beckons and we step a short way into it.

To our right, against the wall of the cave, is a curious narrow three-sided framework, a kind of tapering doorway, with deep darkness behind it. It is made of an odd glossy metal, or perhaps a plastic, with a texture that is both sleek and porous at the same time. There are hieroglyphs inscribed on it that seem much like those I saw on the wall of the stone

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temple in the mural in the Goddess-chapel on Eden, and to either side of it, mounted in the cave wall, are the triple six-pointed stars that are the emblem of Oesterreich's cult.

"What is this here?" I say, after a time.

"It's something like a Velde transmitter."

"It isn't anything like a Velde transmitter."

"It works very much like a Velde transmitter," he says. "You'll see when we step into its field. Are you ready?"

"Wait."

He nods. "I'm waiting."

"We're going to let this thing send us somewhere?"

"That's right, your grace."

"What is it? Who built it?"

"I've already told you what it is. As for who built it, I don't have any idea. Nobody does. We think it's five or ten million years old, maybe. It could be older than that by a factor of ten. Or a factor of a hundred. We have no way of judging."

After a long silence I say, "You're telling me that it's an alien device?"

"That's right."

"We've never discovered any sign of intelligent alien life anywhere in the galaxy."

"There's one right in front of you," Oesterreich says. "It isn't the only one."

"You've found aliens?"

"We've found their matter-transmitters. A few of them, anyway. They still work. Are you ready to jump now, your grace?"

I stare blankly at the three-sided doorway.

"Where to?"

"To a planet about five hundred light-years from here, where we can catch the bus that'll take us to the Goddess Avatar."

"You're actually serious?"

"Let's go, your grace."

"What about lambda effects?"

"There aren't any. Lambda differentials are a flaw in the Velde technology, not in the universe itself. This system gets us around without any lambda problems at all. Of course, we don't know how it works. Are you ready?"

"All right," I say helplessly.

He beckons to me and together we step toward the doorway and simply walk through it, and out the other side into such astonishing beauty that I want to fall down and give praise. Great feathery trees rise higher than sequoias, and a milky waterfall comes tumbling down the flank of an ebony mountain that fills half the sky, and the air quivers with a dia-

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mond-bright haze. Before me stretches a meadow like a scarlet carpet, vanishing into the middle distance. There is a Mesozoic richness of texture to everything: it gleams, it shimmers, it trembles in splendor.

A second doorway, identical to the first, is mounted against an enormous boulder right in front of us. It too is flanked by the triple star emblem.

"Put your medallion on," Oesterreich tells me.

"My medallion?" I say, stupidly.

"Put it on. The Goddess Avatar will wonder why you're with me, and that'll tell her."

"Is she here?"

"She's on the next world. This is just a way station. We had to stop here first. I don't know why. Nobody does. Ready?"

"I'd like to stay here longer."

"You can come back some other time," he says. "She's waiting for you. Let's go."

"Yes," I say, and fumble in my pocket and find my medallion, and put it around my throat. Oesterreich winks and puts his thumb and forefinger together approvingly. He takes my hand and we step through.

She is a lean, leathery-looking woman of sixty or seventy years with hard bright blue eyes. She wears a khaki jacket, an olive-drab field hat, khaki shorts, heavy boots. Her graying hair is tucked behind her in a tight bun. Standing in front of a small tent, tapping something into a hand terminal, she looks like an aging geology professor out on a field trip in Wyoming. But next to her tent the triple emblem of the Goddess is displayed on a sandstone plaque.

This is a Mesozoic landscape too, but much less lush than the last one: great red-brown cliffs sparsely peppered with giant ferns and palms, four-winged insects the size of dragons zooming overhead, huge grotesque things that look very much like dinosaurs warily circling each other in a stony arroyo out near the horizon. I see some other tents out there too. There is a little colony here. The sun is reddish-yellow, and large.

"Well, what do we have here?" she says. "A Lord Magistrate, is it?"

"He was nosing around on Zima and Entrada, trying to find out what was going on."

"Well, now he knows." Her voice is like flint. I feel her contempt, her hostility, like something palpable. I feel her strength, too, cold, harsh, brutal power. She says, "What was your House, Lord Magistrate?"

"Senders."

She studies me as if I were a specimen in a display case. In all my life I have known only one other person of such force and intensity, and that is the Master. But she is nothing like him.

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"And now the Sender is sent?"

"Yes," I say. "There were deviations from the plan. It became necessary for me to resign my magistracy."

"We weren't supposed to come out this far, were we?" she asks. "The light of that sun up there won't get to Earth until the seventy-third century, do you know that? But here we are. Here we are!" She laughs, a crazed sort of cackle. I begin to wonder if they intend to kill me. The aura that comes from her is terrifying. The geology professor I took her for at first is gone: what I see now is something strange and fierce, a prophet, a seer. Then suddenly the fierceness vanishes too and something quite different comes from her: tenderness, pity, even love. The strength of it catches me unawares and I gasp at its power. These shifts of hers are managed without apparent means; she has spoken only a few words, and all the rest has been done with movement, with posture, with expression. I know that I am in the presence of some great charismatic. She walks over to me and with her face close to mine says, "We spoiled your plan, I know. But we too follow the divine rule. We discovered things that nobody had suspected, and everything changed for us. Everything."

"Do you need me, Lady?" Oesterreich asks.

"No. Not now." She touches the tips of her fingers to my medallion of office, rubbing it lightly as though it is a magic talisman. Softly she says, "Let me take you on a tour of the galaxy, Lord Magistrate."

One of the alien doorways is located right behind her tent. We step through it hand in hand, and emerge on a dazzling green hillside looking out over a sea of ice. Three tiny blue-white suns hang like diamonds in the sky. In the trembling air they look like the three six-pointed stars of the emblem. "One of their capital cities was here once," she says. "But it's all at the bottom of that sea now. We ran a scan on it and saw the ruins, and some day we'll try to get down there." She beckons and we step through again, and out onto a turbulent desert of iron-hard red sand, where heavily armored crabs the size of footballs go scuttling sullenly away as we appear. "We think there's another city under here," she says. Stooping, she picks up a worn sherd of gray pottery and puts it in my hand. "That's an artifact millions of years old. We find them all over the place." I stare at it as if she has handed me a small fragment of the core of a star. She touches my medallion again, just a light grazing stroke, and leads me on into the next doorway, and out onto a world of billowing white clouds and soft dewy hills, and onward from there to one where trees hang like ropes from the sky, and onward from there, and onward from there—

"How did you find all this?" I ask, finally.

"I was living on Three Suns. You know where that is? We were exploring the nearby worlds, trying to see if there was anything worthwhile,

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and one day I stepped out of a Velde unit and found myself looking at a peculiar three-sided kind of doorway right next to it, and I got too close and found myself going through into another world entirely. That was all there was to it."

"And you kept on going through one doorway after another?"

"Fifty of them. I didn't know then how to tune for destination, so I just kept jumping, hoping I'd get back to my starting point eventually. There wasn't any reason in the world why I should. But after six months I did. The Goddess protects me."

"The Goddess," I say.

She looks at me as though awaiting a challenge. But I am silent.

"These doorways link the whole galaxy together like the Paris Metro," she says after a moment. "We can go everywhere with them. *Everywhere.*"

"And the Goddess? Are the doorways Her work?"

"We hope to find that out some day."

"What about this emblem?" I ask, pointing to the six-pointed stars beside the gateway. "What does that signify?"

"Her presence," she says. "Come. I'll show you."

We step through once more, and emerge into night. The sky on this world is the blackest black I have ever seen, with comets and shooting stars blazing across it in almost comic profusion. There are two moons bright as mirrors. A dozen meters to one side is the white stone temple of the chapel mural I saw on Eden, marked with the same hieroglyphs that are shown on the painting there and that are inscribed on all the alien doorways. It is made of cyclopean slabs of white stone that look as if they were carved billions of years ago. She takes my arm and guides me through its squared-off doorway into a high-vaulted inner chamber where the triple six-pointed triangle, fashioned out of the glossy doorway material, is mounted on a stone altar.

"This is the only building of theirs we've ever found," she says. Her eyes are gleaming. "It must have been a holy place. Can you doubt it? You can feel the power."

"Yes."

"Touch the emblem."

"What will happen to me if I do?"

"Touch it," she says. "Are you afraid?"

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because the Goddess has used me to bring you to this place. Go on. Touch."

I put my hand to the smooth cool alien substance, and instantly I feel the force of revelation flowing through me, the unmistakable power of the Godhead. I see the multiplicity of worlds, an infinity of them circling an infinity of suns. I see the Totality. I see the face of God clear and

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plain. It is what I have sought all my life and thought that I had already found; but I know at once that I am finding it for the first time. If I had fasted for a thousand years, or prayed for ten thousand, I could not have felt anything like that. It is the music out of which all things are built. It is the ocean in which all things float. I hear the voice of every god and goddess that ever had worshippers, and it is all one voice, and it goes coursing through me like a river of fire.

After a moment I take my hand away. And step back, trembling, shaking my head. This is too easy. One does not reach God by touching a strip of smooth plastic.

She says, "We mean to find them. They're still alive somewhere. How could they not be? And who could doubt that we were meant to follow them and find them? And kneel before them, for they are Whom we seek. So we'll go on and on, as far as we need to go, in search of them. To the farthest reaches, if we have to. To the rim of the universe and then beyond. With these doorways there are no limits. We've been handed the key to everywhere. We are for the Dark, all of it, on and on and on, not the little hundred-light-year sphere that your Order preaches, but the whole galaxy and even beyond. Who knows how far these doorways reach? The Magellanic Clouds? Andromeda? M33? They're waiting for us out there. As they have waited for a billion years."

So she thinks she can hunt Him down through doorway after doorway. Or Her. Whichever. But she is wrong. He who made the universe made the makers of the doorways also.

"And the Goddess—?" I say.

"The Goddess is the Unknown. The Goddess is the Mystery toward which we journey. You don't feel Her presence?"

"I'm not sure."

"You will. If not now, then later. She'll greet us when we arrive. And embrace us, and make us all gods."

I stare a long while at the six-pointed stars. It would be simple enough to put forth my hand again and drink in the river of revelation a second time. But there is no need. That fire still courses through me. It always will, drawing me onward toward itself. Whatever it may be, there is no denying its power.

She says, "I'll show you one more thing, and then we'll leave here."

We continue through the temple and out the far side, where the wall has toppled. From a platform amid the rubble we have an unimpeded view of the heavens. An immense array of stars glitters above us, set out in utterly unfamiliar patterns. She points straight overhead, where a Milky Way in two whirling strands spills across the sky.

"That's Earth right up there," she says. "Can you see it? Going around that little yellow sun, only a hundred thousand light-years away? I won-

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der if they ever paid us a visit. We won't know, will we, until we turn up one of their doorways somewhere in the Himalayas, or under the Antarctic ice, or somewhere like that. I think that when we finally reach them, they'll recognize us. It's interesting to think about, isn't it." Her hand rests lightly on my wrist. "Shall we go back now, Lord Magistrate?"

So we return, in two or three hops, to the world of the dinosaurs and the giant dragonflies. There is nothing I can say. I feel storms within my skull. I feel myself spread out across half the universe.

Oesterreich waits for me now. He will take me back to Phosphor, or Entropy, or Entrada, or Zima, or Cuchulain, or anywhere else I care to go.

"You could even go back to Earth," the Goddess Avatar says. "Now that you know what's happening out here. You could go back home and tell the Master all about it."

"The Master already knows, I suspect. And there's no way I can go home. Don't you understand that?"

She laughs lightly. "Darklaw, yes. I forgot. The rule is that no one goes back. We've been catapulted out here to be cleansed of original sin, and to return to Mother Earth would be a crime against the laws of thermodynamics. Well, as you wish. You're a free man."

"It isn't Darklaw," I say. "Darklaw doesn't bind anyone any more."

I begin to shiver. Within my mind shards and fragments are falling from the sky: the House of Senders, the House of the Sanctuary, the whole Order and all its laws, the mountains and valleys of Earth, the body and fabric of Earth. All is shattered; all is made new; I am infinitely small against the infinite greatness of the cosmos. I am dazzled by the light of an infinity of suns.

And yet, though I must shield my eyes from that fiery glow, though I am numbed and humbled by the vastness of that vastness, I see that there are no limits to what may be attained, that the edge of the universe awaits me, that I need only reach and stretch, and stretch and reach, and ultimately I will touch it.

I see that even if she has made too great a leap of faith, even if she has surrendered herself to assumptions without basis, she is on the right path. The quest is unattainable because its goal is infinite. But the way leads ever outward. There is no destination, only a journey. And she has traveled farther on that journey than anyone.

And me? I had thought I was going out into the stars to spin out the last of my days quietly and obscurely, but I realize now that my pilgrimage is nowhere near its end. Indeed it is only beginning. This not any road that I ever thought I would take. But this is the road that I am taking, all the same, and I have no choice but to follow it, though I am

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not sure yet whether I am wandering deeper into exile or finding my way back at last to my true home.

What I cannot help but see now is that our Mission is ended and that a new one has begun; or, rather, that this new Mission is the continuation and culmination of ours. Our Order has taught from the first that the way to reach God is to go to the stars. So it is. And so we have done. We have been too timid, limiting ourselves to that little ball of space surrounding Earth. But we have not failed. We have made possible everything that is to follow after.

I hand her my medallion. She looks at it the way I looked at that bit of alien pottery on the desert world, and then she starts to hand it back to me, but I shake my head.

"For you," I say. "A gift. An offering. It's of no use to me now."

She is standing with her back to the great reddish-yellow sun of this place, and it seems to me that light is streaming from her as it does from the Master, that she is aglow, that she is luminous, that she is herself a sun.

"Goddess save you, Lady," I say quietly.

All the worlds of the galaxy are whirling about me. I will take this road and see where it leads, for now I know there is no other.

"Goddess save you," I say. "Goddess save you, Lady." ●

MYTHOLOGY TO ANN

your hands move
——symbols fill the air
——water flows
——your hair shines with the sun.
I dare to hold you.
Aching for its strength
I lower you to the earth.
You cry out.
Onto your hands, still
Filling the air with leaves,
I place a kiss.

your hands move
——symbols fill my body
——water flows
——the dark forest of your hair
leaps with wild animals.
Let my lips worship
at your neck;
teach me at your altar.
I cry out.
My faith
Is your body's warmth.

—Roger Dutcher

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

The Next Sex

The Breeds of Man

By F. M. Busby

Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

A cure for AIDS is what causes all the problems in F.M. Busby's new novel, *The Breeds of Man.* You'd think that would be A Good Thing, and it is indeed in the near future in which the novel is set; the cure is an orally ingested vaccine, and it is spread throughout the world harmlessly mixed into staple food supplies. It works, but harmless it is not. It makes every potential mother of a second child immune to the sperm of her first child's father. Think about it. . . .

This effect isn't noticed for nearly a decade, due to other complicating factors, but then the world awakes to the fact that the population is wa-a-a-a-a-y down. This again would seem A Good Thing, but humanity's social setup—from markets to social security—almost breaks under the strain, not to mention the problems it raises with the concept of marital fidelity. (Those of us who feel that overpopulation is the greatest evil facing the world today may find Busby's pessimistic view of a counter effect pretty discouraging.)

Since society insists on breeding, the foundation/corporation that came up with the AIDS cure starts to work on the new problem. The Phoenix (as the found/corp is called) is a secretive outfit, but it gets results. Soon many of its employee-volunteer wives are pregnant for the second time by the same man, thanks to some messing about with chromosomes. All seems well, but the babies that are born—otherwise perfectly healthy little specimens—all have more than vestigial organs of the opposite sex.

To make a long story short, this new breed, on reaching puberty, changes sex on a more or less monthly basis. ("If it's January, I must be female. . . .") They call themselves M2s (for Mark Two models). And it's their very existence which sends shockwaves through the country. If you're familiar with any of the other stories about variant species of humanity, you can guess what happens. Despite the Phoenix's attempt to keep them secret, word leaks out, and soon fundamentalist Christians, the government, and the media are all hot on the trail of our hero/ heroines, some of whom by this time have moved out of the Phoenix enclave. Then there are the dissident M2s, who want to go public. There's

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lots of intrigue, kidnappings, and chases, and a murder on the Moon. Busby skims along the surface of the fast-moving story, which, lord knows, never gets dull. Perhaps one would like a little more depth to the hermaphrodite characters (one of whom tells part of the story in the first person). While their differences are described (and justified) in graphic physiological detail, they seem to take their alternating sexuality on and off as easily as other people change socks. That aspect seems a little too easy, given the hysterical gender-consciousness of our culture.

The OTHER Ring

Expecting Someone Taller

By Tom Holt

St. Martin's, $15.95

Did you ever wonder what happened to the Ring? No, not *that* Ring—we all know it went into the Cracks of Doom. No, the *other* Ring —the Volsung Ring—the Wagner Ring —the Ring of the Nibelungs, widely known in musical circles. (Well, *some* musical circles—I doubt if Madonna has ever heard of it.)

Tom Holt spills the beans in *Expecting Someone Taller*. It seems that Ingolf, younger brother of the dwarf, Alberich, managed to steal the Ring and the magic Tarnhelm (shape-changing tool and general useful magical implement) during all the fuss of Gotterdammerung. For the past several centuries, he has been, thanks to the Tarnhelm, happily living as a badger in Somerset (happily, that is, except for the fleas). When he gets run over by a nerdish type named Malcolm, he must, by the rules, pass on the magic artifacts. The Ring, of course, makes the owner the master of the world, and Ingolf being a not very nice person accounts for the state the world has been in for the past millennium.

He knew that eventually someone would take over the Ring, but he had anticipated a heroic, Siegfried type. "I was expecting someone taller," he says before expiring. Malcolm, though nerd*ish*, repressed, and a bit slow as well as being shorter than heroic stature, turns out to be rather sensible about the whole thing, though at first bemused by the turn of events in general and the various magical properties of his new possessions in particular. (Ingolf tells him how he can get a shower of dwarf-made gold. Doing what's required, he is almost buried by a rain of gold: plates, torques, cuff links, ash trays, and unformed objects "presumably made by apprentice Nibelungs . . . under the general heading of paperweights." Then there's the problem of turning the gold into ready cash, which he solves rather ingeniously.) Not to mention all those birds telling him things he doesn't particularly want to know.

In fact, Malcolm copes rather well, and the world in toto, reflecting his general good-heartedness, takes a turn for the better. But it seems that most of the Gods, as well as a lot of the other nature spirits, are still around, making

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their way unnoticed in the modern world. And before Malcolm can say "Gotterdammerung" he is besieged by various of those involved in the earlier fracas, still trying to get the Ring back. Alberich turns up, as does Loge, *and* the Rhinemaidens. Wotan tries the "Siegfried option," i.e., beguiling him with one of the remaining Valkyries (in this case, Ortlinde) who, despite their butch reputation, are a gorgeous bunch (albeit pretty neurotic after being shut up with Wotan in Valhalla all these years).

The Ring-Bearer does indeed fall for Ortlinde, and to confuse matters, the prettiest of the Rhine daughters, who are a trio of tough cookies, falls for *him*. Things come to a Wagnerian climax—no, let's avoid that adjective—a ring-a-ding climax when Wotan, in desperation, summons the Army of the Storm to wrest the Ring from Malcolm by force.

Expecting Someone Taller is the old story of the mere mortal acquiring a mythical object which involves him with all the forces of legend. Tom Holt brings to it a jaunty modernity that ranks it with the best of the genre, mixing the cosmic and the comic with sensational effect.

Second Reconstruction

The General's President
By John Dalmas
Baen, $3.50 (paper)

It's the day after tomorrow (maybe even tomorrow) and the U.S. has just about gone down the tubes. The economy has collapsed, unemployment is running over fifty percent, and there is, not surprisingly, rioting in the streets.

And, just to add to the fun, the president is having a physical and mental breakdown, and has just forced the resignation of the incompetent vice president. Who can save the U.S. now?

The president tries to appoint one of his Chiefs of Staff, a general, as vice president with the intention of resigning immediately. The general, a man of great good sense, feels that the nation would not accept a military head of state, and asks for two days to find a substitute. He does indeed, one Arne Haugen, child of Finnish and Norwegian immigrants, who has amassed a respectable fortune through his own electronics corporation.

The General's President, by John Dalmas, is the story of how President Haugen, with emergency powers and his own good sense, turns the nation around and accomplishes a second reconstruction.

Didactic SF, that which purports to show how to get to a better order of things, has a distinguished history in the field—Wells and Verne were certainly among its practitioners. The dangers of writing it are the temptations to break into preaching and/or losing your reader by advancing the story in fits and starts around the polemics. Dalmas is a smooth, intelligent, and knowledgeable writer, but he

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doesn't avoid these pitfalls totally. The story does tend to pause all too often for the president's views on the problems of the legal, medical, and educational systems, and the international scene, and their solutions. Dalmas doesn't seem to be overtly pushing any particular "ism" except for common sense (his President Haugen is chock full of that); readers more up on currently popular political currents can draw their own conclusions.

On the other other hand, he does spice up the story with several intriguing dramatic wild cards, including missile and ninja (yes, ninja) attacks on the White House, the bombing of a nuclear plant close to Washington by fanatic antinukers, and the development of a weapon by both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. that can cause earthquakes and change the weather drastically, thereby causing a brief but horrendous "weatherwar." There is also confrontation with a sort of secret elitist cabal which has been guiding the U.S. for over half a century (inspired by the writings of the South African General Smuts), a sort of negative Second Foundation in our midst.

And, last but not least, there is the really swell cheap energy source that President Haugen's electronics corporation has developed just before he is drafted into the presidency (unknown to the general who picks him—here Dalmas stretches coincidence just a little far).

In the midst of all this, Dalmas does manage to portray the president and his wife as human and rather moving people, albeit a bit larger (and better) than life. But heroes are allowed that. . . .

Mercenaries

Not For Glory

By Joel Rosenberg
NAL, $16.95

Metzada is a planet settled by Jewish refugees, and apparently even harder to make livable than Palestine was. Its main export is its very tough Metzadan Mercenary Corps, which hires out to fight, intrigue, and/or win in any way possible for whoever pays them. Joel Rosenberg's *Not For Glory* is the first-person account by an officer in the Corps of some of its adventures.

This kind of thing can be marvelous action and adventure stuff, but Rosenberg seems to be aiming for something more. The problem is that the major factors in such a story are intrigue, tactics, strategy, double-dealing, and other such matters which must be made absolutely crystal clear to the reader for them to be effective and for the intricate machinations of the forces involved to make a narrative point. Rosenberg just doesn't maintain that clarity, and doesn't help matters by having his narrator prone to frequent and oblique philosophizing. All too often you're just not sure who's doing what, and with what, and to whom—not to mention who really won in the various complex conflicts.

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This is more than a little annoying, since the background concept is a very good one, and you want to know more about the busy, multifarious universe the author merely hints at. And the moral ambiguity of the final point—that here is a culture, or at least an important part of a culture, doing a whole lot of despicable things *not for glory* (see title), not for money, but simply to *survive*—does raise the novel above the usual battling-mercenary effort.

Alien Christians

Sin of Origin
By John Barnes
Congden & Weed, $15.95

Randall is a very involved planet. Though it has *some* plant life, it's barren as hell; there are no grasses of any sort. There are three—count 'em—three intelligent races. One is humanoid, one is griffinoid, one is herpa—, herpe—, . . . er, snake-like. They live a unique social life: a member of each species is bonded in infancy to an individual of the other two, and they from then on move as a threesome through life.

To further complicate their lives, each species, in a different way, is conceived or borne in pain and stress. To the humanoids, sex is committed (the only word) in a period of frenzy and craziness, like a Terran animal's rutting season, and is agonizingly painful to the female to boot. The griffinoids are hatched in clutches, immediately after which there is a battle to the death among the hatchlings and the strongest not only kills but eats his siblings. They are well enough developed at hatching to remember this through their lives. The telepathic serpentoids are born only by splitting open (and killing) the mother.

John Barnes' *Sin of Origin* is the account of the study of Randallan society made by two Terran "xenists" in the middle of what seems a war to the death between the Randallan sapients and a large exploratory expeditionary force of humans. This force has been sent by one of the three major political divisions of space-going humanity, the Catholic Church, ruled from the Vatican. (The others are Islamic and Communist.) All of the expedition's members are monks of various orders: familiar ones—Jesuits, Franciscans, and the revived Templars (the military order), and the more recently established Baconians, Changists, Leonardists, and Mbweists.

The human xenists establish the facts of the natives' peculiar social order, and convince the triple Randallan Kings of Christianity's acceptability (with the help of the concept of the Trinity). We follow the course of human contact with Randall for several decades. The Randallans cope with such human matters as conversion, democracy, slavery, and rebellion. Eventually a griffin bishop is appointed, and makes the long journey to the interstellar archbishopric of Arimathea (instantaneous *subjectively*, seventeen years objectively), where

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he is involved in a murder motivated by interstellar conspiracies.

Barnes handles a lot of interesting ideas well—such as the results of the great lengths of objective time needed for traveling between the stars and the effect on the dispersed human societies. And he manages the difficult trick of presenting a religious culture objectively—it comes over neither as proselytism or lampoon. On the other hand, because of the large grab bag of ideas, you never really get involved in the story as drama, though the basic material is there. The two times it really comes alive are in an historical flashback where you learn about the origins of the tripling process, and in the self-sacrificing death of the griffin bishop.

Future Gaga

Don't Bite the Sun
By Tanith Lee
Starmont House, $19.95

Regular readers know that noises about reprints erupt periodically from this column—moans about major or minor classics out of print, huzzahs for any of such that make it back to availability. This month a huzzah for Tanith Lee's second novel, not to be got for a long time, which the above-listed publisher has given back to us as the first of what seems to be a long-term project to reprint worthy novels that have been lost in the shuffle.

Don't Bite the Sun is set in a city—a "utopic" city—of the far future; it's akin to Diaspar of Clarke's *The City and the Stars,* but rather like that splendid town (a place I hope to go to when I die) gone completely and dippily amok. What Lee revealed in this novel, to those readers who had been captured by her first, *The Birthgrave,* was that hen's-tooth-type rarity, a science fiction writer with a sense of humor. The adventures of her adolescent heroine in the city of Four BEE in a society whose young people spend their time killing themselves, being rejuvenated, changing sex, and shoplifting, are very funny indeed. In particular there are the running misdeeds of the pet that she has shoplifted in a moment of carelessness, a flopsy object with too many legs. The pet creates an unexpected, serious finale that presages a sequel, *Drinking Sapphire Wine;* the two books together are one novel chronicling the maturing in most unusual circumstances of a most unusual heroine (sometimes hero).

Let's hope that the second book will soon rejoin the first in print.

Shoptalk

Sequels & Ongoing Series . . . . The eighth *Amber* book by Roger Zelazny is now available in paperback. The title: *Sign of Chaos* (Avon, $3.50, paper) . . . Fred Saberhagen's *Berserkers: The Ultimate Enemy* has been reprinted (Baen, $2.95, paper) . . . *The Dog and the Wolf,* the fourth and final book in "The King of Ys," the historically fascinating cycle by Poul and Karen Anderson, is out.

Helpful readers have called my

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attention to the fact that various titles which I had bemoaned as being out of print were available through a book club. It's good to know that they're available at all, but I don't consider something you can get only by joining a club as readily accessible.

But there are some recent reprints which should be right there in the stores that are certainly worth noting. There are, for instance, fire and ice from Poul Anderson, specifically *Fire Time* (Baen, $3.50, paper) and *The Winter of the World* (Signet, $3.50, paper).... And three magics from Andre Norton—*Fur Magic, Steel Magic,* and *Octagon Magic*—have been published in one volume under the collective title of *The Magic Books* (Signet, $3.95, paper).... Theodore Sturgeon's wonderful *The Dreaming Jewels,* which should never be out of print, is *back* in print (Carroll & Graf, $3.95, paper).

One of the great classic fantasies which influenced many, many of those that followed it after its publication in 1906 is *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling, in which Puck (*the* Puck, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) takes two English children through time to various periods of history. It's again available (NAL, $3.50, paper).

From some things old to some things new.... James P. Hogan's *Minds, Machines and Evolution* is an interesting mix of fiction (short stories) and nonfiction (essays on everything from nuclear energy to scientific mysticism) (Bantam, $3.95, paper).... *The Motion of Light In Water* is subtitled "Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965.". Well might you wonder what that's all about. It's an autobiography by Samuel R. Delany, sure to be of interest to the lit'ry-minded SF reader. (I'm just glad my friendship with Chip Delany began *after* 1965.) (Arbor House, $18.95).... And, curiously enough, another autobiography, *Bio of an Ogre.* I'm tempted to say by guess who?, since there are clues in the title. But I wouldn't want frustrated readers, so let's reveal it's Piers Anthony (Ace, $17.95).

David Lindsay's mystical SF novel, *A Voyage To Arcturus,* has for years had a strong cult following. Since he died in 1945, you might wonder what could be new from him? Well, his novel *Sphinx* has never before been published in the U.S. It is now (Carroll & Graf, $17.95).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Prelude To Foundation* by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, $18.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The circum-WorldCon lull lets us look further ahead this time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many phones are homes; be polite). When writing cons, enclose a SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a music keyboard.

AUGUST, 1988

12-14—**Con.** For info, write: **Box 5703, Portland OR 97228.** Or call: **(503) 823-0802** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton Inn Airport. Guests will include: Chelsea Q. Yarbro. "A generic SF con." Vampire emphasis.

12-14—**BabelCon.** Airport Hilton, Grand Rapids MI. Media-oriented, but still fannish (no stars).

19-21—**UniCon.** King Alfred's College, Winchester, England. Patrick Tilley, Michael De Larrabeiti.

26-28—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 256-7161.** John Stith, artist Phil Hale.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $100 at door.

8-11—**Coppercon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282. (602) 838-6873 or 968-5673.** Post-WorldCon relaxacon.

22-25—**French National Con, % Audemard, 118 av. de Stalingrad, Colombes 92700, France.** In Paris.

23-25—**MosCon, Box 8251, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364 or 882-3672.** Anne (Pern) McCaffrey.

23-25—**ArmadaCon, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead, Plymouth PL3 5HL, UK. (0752) 267-873.**

30-2 Oct.—**Contradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** Buffalo NY. Pohl.

OCTOBER, 1988

7-9—**CymruCon, % McCarthy, 29 Claude Rd., Cardiff, Wales. 593-590.** Butlin Holiday Camp, Barry Is.

7-9—**NonCon, 5308 40th Ave. NW, Calgary AB T3A 0X4. (403) 286-8128.** Palliser Hotel. F. & E. Busby.

7-9—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Roanoke VA. J. May, K. Freas, H. Clement.

7-9—**BoucherCon, % Grounds for Murder, 2707 Congress, San Diego CA 92110.** World mystery-con.

21-23—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347/973-0038.** Low-key, fannish con.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. Andre Norton.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1.

28-Sept. 1—**ConDiego, % Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115.(619) 265-0903.**NASFiC. $45 to 10/1/88.

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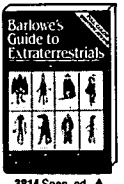

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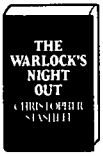

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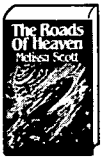

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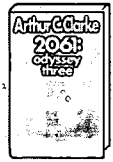

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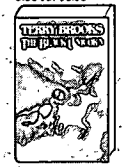

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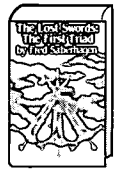

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